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"HELLO! HELLO! HELLO! OH, MISTER PRIMROSE! COME DAOWN YER' A MINIT!
OH, MISTER—"

OR,

JOSH PEPPERMINT'S JUBILEE.

BY LIEUT. A. K. SIMS,
AUTHOR OF "THE DANDY OF DODGE," "CAPTAIN
CACTUS, THE CHAPARRAL COCK," ETC.

CHAPTER I. "HANDS UP."

A HEAVY, Concord stage, drawn by four horses, was rattling along the rugged trail between Rocky Butte and Bullion City. It held six persons; three of them worthy of a special introduction to the reader.

Lucas Waldo, the owner of the Silver Lode, a valuable piece of mining property located near Bullion City, was a man of about sixty, with a bronzed but pleasant face, and kindly, dark eyes. His black hair was plentiful.

streaked with silver, and a close scrutiny revealed lines in the firm face which showed that life had held for him its share of sorrow and disappointment.

At his side sat his daughter, Jennie, who was just budding into charming womanhood. There was a marked resemblance between father and daughter. She had his dark hair and eyes, and the same pleasant, kindly smile.

Jennie was Waldo's only daughter, and was now regarded as his only child. He had a son, but whether that son was living or dead he did not know. Waldo seldom spoke of this son. He had never heard of him since the night of his disappearance, years ago, and the recollections clustering around that disappearance were too bitter to be voluntarily recalled.

The third passenger was a young man of brilliant, dashing appearance, known throughout the mining regions as Sunny Selim, the Silver Sport. There was a fire in his fine, dark eyes, a gleam of sunshine in his handsome, brown face and a cheery ring in the tones of his voice that drew friends about him and knitted them to him as with hooks of steel. A wide-brimmed hat, soft as velvet and ornamented with a silver cord, surmounted his curling, jetty locks. His limbs and feet were incased in neat-fitting pants, of some dark material, and polished, high-topped boots. A Mexican jacket, spangled with silver buttons and trimmed with silver braid, set off his well-modeled form to perfection; and beneath the jacket gleamed the butts of a pair of silver-mounted revolvers.

The other occupants of the stage were a trio of villainous cut-throats, if their looks did not belie them.

Except by reputation the Silver Sport was a stranger to Mr. Waldo and Jennie. A few common-places about the weather and the scenery had been exchanged after entering the stage at Rocky Butte; but Mr. Waldo showed no special desire to cultivate the acquaintance of this comparatively unknown man, and the conversation lagged and then ceased altogether.

Perhaps Jennie's impulses were warmer than her father's. At any rate she cast many shy glances at the handsome young fellow seated almost opposite. Once their eyes met, and a flush of confusion mantled her lovely face.

Darkness fell before the journey was half completed. The country became more open, however, as they approached Bullion City, and the horses trotted steadily onward through the night.

Suddenly a man rode out of the bushes at the side of the trail, pointed a Winchester at the driver and shouted:

"Hands up, or I'll let the moon shine through you!"

His face was covered by a heavy mask, and he was mounted on a burro. He was tall and powerful-looking, and the animal he rode was so diminutive that his feet almost touched the ground.

As he gave the command, a number of road-agents swarmed out of the bushes. Two of them seized the lead-horses by their bridles, effectually preventing any attempt at escape.

"Better cave, gents! They've got us!" shouted the driver, to the occupants of the stage.

At the first appearance of the mounted road-agent the Silver Sport had drawn his revolvers.

"Shall we fight?" he asked, appealing to Mr. Waldo. Then, remembering Jennie and noticing terror plainly revealed in her face:

"No; that won't do! The young lady's life would be imperiled. I trust you haven't much that they will care for. As for me, a few dollars and these tools are my present earthly possessions."

He smiled so encouragingly that Jennie's fears were greatly lessened, and she awaited the ordeal with more bravery than she had ever given herself the credit of possessing.

The trio of ruffians at the opposite end of the coach conferred in low whispers; then shoved their hands above their heads.

Mr. Waldo glared furiously at the encircling bandits.

"If it wasn't for Jennie I'd defy the whole outfit!" he exclaimed.

"Same over here," added the Silver Sport, twirling the cylinders of his revolvers round to see that they were in working order.

The trio lowered their hands for an instant and glowered ominously at the sport.

Mr. Waldo leaned forward, touched his daughter's hand, and whispered some hurried words. The action passed apparently unnoticed by the other occupants of the stage.

"Tumble out of there!" commanded the burro-rider, impatiently.

"Tumble it is!" responded one of the trio, as they descended and arranged themselves in a line.

Then twin jets of flame leaped from the revolvers of the Silver Sport. The men who were restraining the foremost horses fell; the driver, taking his cue, crouched low upon the box and applied his whip with quick strokes.

"Down! In the bottom of the stage! For your lives!" shouted the sport, as the stage started with a terrible lurch.

Mr. Waldo and Jennie crouched upon the floor of the bounding vehicle, while the sport interposed his body between them and danger, and sent a rain of balls into the cluster of astounded road-agents.

The very audacity of the act aided in its successful accomplishment. The suddenness of this attack threw them into confusion. Before they recovered, the horses had passed beyond their reach, and were racing wildly down the trail toward Bullion City.

In their rage and discomfiture they fired a volley at the flying coach; then, with savage imprecations, disappeared among the hills.

As soon as they were beyond danger, the driver drew the horses down to a gentle trot, thus stopping the tremendous surging and swaying of the cumbrous vehicle.

"That was a bold deed," said Mr. Waldo, turning to the Silver Sport, who was now seated on the front seat, apparently looking back over the moonlit trail. "A little reckless, perhaps, but it was well planned and executed, and no doubt saved me a good round sum of money."

There was no response. With a startled look, he advanced and laid his hand upon the sport. He was senseless and blood was dripping from his right temple.

"Stop!" shouted Mr. Waldo, to the stage-driver. "I believe the gentleman here is badly injured; maybe dead."

"Better drive on to the town, hadn't I?" asked the driver. "Them fellers might come down onto us again."

"No danger; we've left them away behind!"

"Oh, do stop, please!" cried Jennie, wringing her hands convulsively.

Thus admonished, the driver drew rein and descended from the box.

With his assistance the young man was lifted out upon the ground, when Mr. Waldo at once made an examination of his injuries.

"Nothing serious," he said, "though it was certainly a close call. A ball grazed his temple. He is not hurt otherwise that I can discover, and doubtless will recover in a few minutes."

The driver hurried away and soon returned with his hat full of water; and Jennie, with her soft, delicate hands, bathed the temples of the wounded man and washed away the blood-stains with touching gentleness.

There seemed to be a magnetic healing in her touch; for, after a few passes, the sport opened his eyes inquiringly and then sat up.

He looked about him, and lifted his hand to his head.

"Creased, eh?" he questioned.

Jennie had withdrawn toward the stage and Mr. Waldo answered:

"Just a skull scratch, I am glad to say. You will be all right in a little while."

"Oh, I am all right now. A little dizzy. Give me your hand and I'll crawl back into the coach."

Mr. Waldo assisted him to his feet and into the vehicle.

"Many thanks for your kindness, I am sure!" said the young man, smiling, as he sunk heavily into a seat.

"The thanks belong to you!" returned Waldo, as the stage again started on its way. "Your brave, though rather reckless, act, was the means of saving me a considerable sum of money, no doubt. I had ten thousand dollars in bills on my person, when we were commanded to halt. During the excitement I managed to transfer a portion of it to my daughter, but I fear the search would have been so close she could not have retained it."

"I was aware of the transfer," the sport replied. "I saw you make it, though of course I didn't know the amount. That was what determined me to undertake the dash. I thought I saw an excellent chance to break from the cut-throats, so I let fly!"

"What do you suppose became of our fellow-passengers?" Jennie asked, lifting her eyes to his.

"Those scamps?" with an amused laugh. "Without doubt they are members of that very band. They knew the attempt at robbery would be made, and were in the coach for the express purpose of preventing a defense. They must

have felt rather lonesome when we left them so unceremoniously."

An hour later the belated stage rolled into Bullion City. Mr. Waldo endeavored to press a handsome sum upon the Silver Sport as payment for his gallant defense. The latter would not accept anything, and with a kindly "good-night" they separated.

In his room at the hotel, Sunny Selim looked complacently at the furrow plowed by the bullet, as he muttered:

"Not much of a beauty-mark; but it has helped to work me into the good graces of the old gentleman, and I am content."

CHAPTER II.

JOSH PEPPERMINT AND HIS BURR'.

"HEE-HAW! Hee-haw! Hee-haw!"

The exasperating and idiotic bray of a burro echoed along the rocky streets of that lively mining town, Bullion City. The burro had planted itself firmly in the center of the main street and refused to budge an inch in any direction, and its rider was evidently in despair.

"Twist his tail, some one, won't ye?" he said, glancing appealingly at the bystanders.

No one ventured to comply with the request to twist, and he again commenced to belabor and scold at the immobile brute.

This brought forth another series of maddening brays.

"Sings like a canary!" suggested a red-shirted miner, laughingly.

"Go on yer, yeou!" shouted the rider, paying no attention to the remark. "Drat a pesky burr', anybaow!"

He dug his heavy spurs suddenly into its flanks. At this the beast rose upon its hind feet, pitched quickly forward and began to "buck" like a North Texas mustang.

"Whoa! Consarn ye! Whoa! I say."

"Hold 'im down!" yelled the miner, swinging his hat.

Again the spurs gouged its leathery flanks. It thereupon stopped pitching, and darted forward with so violent a plunge that the long-legged rider was almost dismounted.

Burro and rider presented a comical sight as they flew wildly along, and many pedestrians halted to stare wonderingly at the unusual spectacle.

The rider was apparently a countrified youth, tall and gaunt, and with such length of limb that his feet almost brushed the gravel of the street; and with every leap of the burro his arms flew up and down like the wings of some flying machine.

It was not in the nature of a burro to keep up that tremendous pace for any great length of time; so, after a dash of a few hundred yards, it stopped as suddenly as it had started.

As soon as the rider regained his equilibrium, for he had been almost thrown over his steed's head, he stared about with owl-like gravity, and began to read the signs along the street.

His blue eyes lighted up suddenly as they fell upon a gaudy sign just opposite.

"B'gosh, e't ain't the very identical place I'm a-lookin' fer!"

He straightened up and turned the burro's head toward the building, a large, wooden structure, above the door of which gleamed the words, in big, flashy letters:

"PRIMROSE PALACE."

A number of rowdies, roughs and miners, with a sprinkling of the sporting and gambling fraternity, were lounging idly in front of the place.

They stared good-humoredly at the awkward rider, as he advanced.

"Primrose! Primrose! Reckon it can't be the daddy o' my ole sweetheart back tew Varmount! Heern they was a Primrose in this settlement, and thought as haow I'd come over an' vestigate. Runs a stunnin' shop, 'tany rate, whoever he is!"

He reined in the burro and calmly surveyed the smiling throng.

"Hello, Jakie!" shouted a smoothly-shaven sport, anxious for a bit of fun. "How's the craps? S'pose you left dad to hum a-plowin', like a dutiful son, an' come to town to see the sights!"

He thought the rider a "Country-Jake," and so addressed him as "Jakie."

The immediate answer to this sally of the sport was for the burro to turn its heavy eyes upon the speaker and break into another fiendish "hee-haw!"

"Thinks he's faound his brother, this boss does!" observed the lank individual, solemnly.

"Knows his name like a, b, c, and when any

feller speaks tew him that-a-way, he does his beatest to hold his own in the conversashun."

This was greeted with a loud laugh and hurra, and the sport colored visibly.

"Wa-al, gents, I'm a pilgrim an' a stranger in this dasted, measly country, and I'm a-lookin' fer a man named Primrose. Used tew know a Primrose back tew Varmount. Didn't live in a palace, though, an' mebbe this ain't the man."

He looked inquiringly about as if expecting Primrose to advance from the crowd.

Then he turned to the sport who had addressed him as "Jakie."

"Will you be so 'commodatin' as to ax the feller to step out o' his shop a minit? I'm afeard this pesky boss'll run away ef I leave him."

"Ask him yourself!" was the angry reply. The retort to his little joke had evidently cut to the quick.

The answer was accepted literally; and, throwing back his head, the pilgrim and stranger began to yell in stentorian tones:

"Hello! Hello! Hello! Oh, Mister Primrose! Come daown yer' a minit! Oh, Mister—"

"What in thunder's the matter? Do you take me for a sky telephone?"

Caleb Primrose, the proprietor of the Primrose Palace, poked his head through an open window, as he asked the questions.

He was a keen-eyed man of fifty, polished and shrewd and with a not unhandsome face.

"Come down yer', I want tew see yeou!"

A strange look swept over Primrose's face. He withdrew from the window, and a little later, descended to the street. As he passed the irate sport he whispered something, hurriedly, when the fellow gradually edged away from the crowd, and Primrose advanced to greet the pilgrim.

"My name's Peppermint," cried the latter, warmly, extending a hand. "Josh Peppermint, from Varmount; an' this 'ere burr's named Jakie. Used tew know a Primrose daown East. Went courtin' his darter, Sallie, sometimes, when I was to hum. I don't allaow, though, thet yeou're the feller."

"I guess you're barking up the wrong tree, my friend!" Primrose responded, with a meaning glance. "I was never in Vermont and never had a daughter Sallie."

"Wa-al, naow, that's tew bad! Come all the way from Rocky Butte a purpose to see yeou, hearin' thet yeou was in the town. Nice shanty, yeou've got there!"

"It will do!" returned Primrose curtly.

"I reckon, naow, yeou don't want tew hire nobody tew do nuthin', dew yeou? I'm a-wantin' a job, powerful!"

The sport had returned, and a number of determined men mingled with the rapidly gathering crowd.

"I think I can give you a situation—either as a jail-bird or a stiff!" Primrose cried, whipping out a six-shooter.

But, quick as he was, he was not quick enough to catch the stranger napping.

Those dull, blue eyes had noted every movement, without appearing to do so. They now filled with sudden fire, the right hand shot out, and Primrose found himself looking squarely into the rusty tubes of a formidable, if old-fashioned weapon.

At Primrose's first movement, Peppermint had drawn an old, pepper-box revolver and leveled it full at him.

"I allaow yeou was jest a-jokin' about that jail-bird bizness!" he suggested. "Ef I thought yeou meant it, I'd bore a hole plum through yeou, by ginger!"

Primrose quailed before the flash of those stern blue eyes.

"I was only bluffing!" he explained awkwardly, thrusting the half-uplifted revolver back into its place.

The movement was only a ruse, for, as Peppermint lowered his clumsy weapon, the sport, who had been so stung by the Yankee's retort a few minutes before, leaped toward him. The spring was tiger-like, and before Peppermint could turn to meet it, the weapon was dashed from his hand and rolled with a rattling sound upon the stones.

Then the revolver of Primrose again gleamed in the sunlight. A flash and a report followed, but the little burro gave a sudden leap forward, just in time to save its master's life. A dozen hands grasped its bridle, while it plunged and kicked and struggled in a frantic effort to get away.

Again Primrose raised his weapon, a cruel glitter in his keen eyes.

"Fair play!" shouted a cheery voice. "Don't jump onto a man like a lot of curs, just because you happen to have the best of him!"

The weapon was stricken to the ground as Primrose was again pressing the trigger.

The landlord turned, with a baffled snarl, on the new-comer, who was none other than the Silver Sport.

"What is it to you?" he cried in hot anger.

"Not much, but I don't like to see the under dog chewed up without some kind of a show."

The Silver Sport smiled pleasantly, and was glad to see, on glancing about, that there were others in the crowd who felt as he did.

Peppermint having been pulled from his burro—which on being released, had darted wildly away—was now on his feet fighting furiously and surrounded by a clamorous throng.

"Down with the thief! String him up! Hang him!"

Such were the cries that filled the air as the struggling mob swayed backward and forward about the powerful form they were vainly endeavoring to hold.

Seeing that Peppermint was likely to fare badly, the Silver Sport pushed his way to him. Then, placing himself by his side, he held the throng at bay with a brace of revolvers and demanded what was wanted.

"What's the fellow done, anyway?" he asked, appealing to Primrose. "I haven't heard of anything against him. I suppose you don't jump on a fellow this way just for the fun of the thing!"

Thus appealed to Primrose could not avoid a reply.

"He is one of the fellows who attempted to rob the stage, last night, between this place and Rocky Butte. In fact, he was the leader of the gang. He was masked, of course, but he was recognized to-day as soon as he entered the town. And he had the gall to ride the same beast that he rode during the attempted robbery."

"Who makes those charges?" asked Selim, clearly seeing that matters were beginning to look black for Peppermint. "I was in the stage last night and I am satisfied that this is a case of mistaken identity. This person is not the man you say."

"We have three witnesses who are willing to swear that this is the same fellow," persisted Primrose.

To say that Peppermint was astounded, puts it feebly. He had come to town with a definite purpose, which was to secure employment within the walls of the Primrose Palace. That his plans had, in some mysterious way, been made known was now plainly evident.

"If he isn't the fellow let him prove the fact!" called out Primrose, and his words were followed by an angry growl. "I know he can't; but, we're honorable men and willing to give every one a fair show."

"When you can't help yourselves," sneered the sport.

Primrose colored, but he made no reply, further than to repeat his charges, and ask that the stranger be placed in jail to await a trial.

"I suppose it's the best thing you can do," advised Selim, turning to Peppermint. "I will try to see that you get a fair hearing. We can't fight a regiment, you know. One or both of us would be certain to go under."

"Thet suits me jest as well er better than any other way," replied Peppermint, quite calmly. "Didn't have no money tew pay fer a place tew sleep to-night, nohaow. Ef somebody'll on'y look up thet hoss."

"I'll see that your burro is looked after," Selim assured, smiling.

"An my pistil?" continued Peppermint, hesitatingly, as if he feared he might be asking too much. "Thet ole pepper-box, yeou know. It's a-layin' over there on the stuns. My gran'ther fl't intew the Mexican War with thet, an' I wouldn't take a small fortin' fer it."

Selim secured the clumsy weapon, and then Peppermint permitted himself to be led to the rough wooden building which served as a jail.

CHAPTER III.

A COWARDLY ATTACK.

PEPPERMINT'S thoughts were none of the pleasantest, as the jail door closed behind him, and he found himself alone—a prisoner, with a whole town against him.

"Wa-al, I'm in the hands of the pesky Philistines this time, fer cert'in," he said, with an attempted smile, as he sunk upon the one little bench which the room contained. "The question afore the house naow is, how am I a-goin' to git aout?"

It was easier to ask than to answer the question.

Just before dark the jailer appeared, with an apology for a meal. It consisted only of a

glass of water, a piece of stale bread and a bit of cheese.

"Hope yeou don't charge much, fer this is about the poorest hotel I've struck in a good while," Peppermint observed, solemnly, as he surveyed this humble supper.

The jailer, who was a rough-looking Irishman, low-browed and villainous-faced, scowled blackly.

"It's betther than ye'll be havin' to-morry avenin'!"

"Goin' tew give me nothin' but water then, eh?"

"The rale mount'in dew wouldn't tempt ye, I'm thinkin'!"

"Sho! Yeou can't reely mean it! My friend, Mister Primrose, said that he'd give me a fair shake."

Peppermint looked quizzically at the Irishman.

"A fair shake, is it? Faith, an' he'll do that same! But it'll be a shake av yer fut, wid sorry a thing fer it to sthand on."

With this parting reminder, he withdrew.

A little later the Silver Sport was ushered into the room. A long conversation followed, but it was carried on in whispers, much to the disgust of that exemplary person, Mickey McGee, the jailer.

After Selim's departure, McGee brought in a lighted lamp, placing it upon a stand which he arranged in the center of the room.

There was a barred window in one side of the wall, overlooking the street, and a queer smile passed over Peppermint's face as he glanced from the lamp to the window.

"That 'ere chap must take me fer a tarnation idjit!" he muttered, when McGee had departed, as he stepped softly into the darkest corner.

"Wants tew light up this 'ere pesky place so't some o' his frien's kin shoot me with more convenience. Wa-al, naow, they'll have tew git up ahead o' the airly worm tew do that! I'll let thet thing burn awhile jest to please 'em, but I'll be powerful apt to blow it aout afore I go tew bed."

He yawned, as if weary of the whole business, then deliberately seated himself in the darkness and placed an ear against the wall in a listening attitude.

Several times he heard light footsteps and occasionally voices consulting in low tones. He could not make out the words. An hour slipped by and everything grew silent.

Then he stepped quickly and quietly toward the lamp and extinguished it. As he did so, a pistol flashed in the window and a ball sped by him and buried itself in the wall.

"Jeerusalem!" he cried, throwing himself upon the floor and crawling nimbly into the corner he had just vacated. "That was a narrer escape! Thought the skunks had gone away er I wouldn't 'a' ventured aout there."

There was a movement beneath the window and a voice whispered:

"Did you hit him?"

"Wa-al, naow, Mister Skunk, I hardly think 'et yeou did!" Peppermint cried, in answer.

A smothered curse was the only response; and the footsteps glided away.

The hours passed. Midnight came and went. The prisoner grew drowsy at last, and fell into a quiet sleep in the corner where he crouched.

From this slumber he was aroused in the early hours of the morning by the slow and deliberate turning of a key in the heavy lock. He listened, then crept softly to the side of the door.

There was but one person engaged in this attempt at entering, he decided, after hearkening quietly for a little while.

Feeling abundantly able to take care of any single assailant, he stepped back from the door and waited for it to swing open.

The bolt soon shot heavily in the lock, the hinges creaked, the door swung backward and a man glided into the room, only to find Peppermint upon him with a rush.

Down the intruder went under the sudden assault, and they rolled together over and over upon the hard floor, locked in a deadly embrace.

The man attempted to strike Peppermint with the ugly knife grasped in his hand when he entered, but the Yankee caught the uplifted hand, and redoubled his exertions to get the better of his enemy.

For more than five minutes the stubborn contest continued, not a word being spoken, the deep breathing of the combatants alone showing the desperateness of the struggle.

Peppermint more than once gripped his assailant in a steel-like grasp and attempted to lift him from the floor, but whenever he did so the sinner rascal would twist away his right hand

and the uplifted knife would gleam in the moonlight.

Finally they arose, half-way to their feet, bending and writhing like young pines in a gale. They staggered and reeled for an instant, then Peppermint brought all his wondrous strength into play and hurled the would-be assassin against the heavy slab-door.

The fellow sunk to the floor in a limp heap, the knife slipped from his nerveless fingers and his features were plainly revealed.

It was Mickey McGee, the jailer!

"Jerusalem, Nantucket an' the North Pole!" exclaimed the Yankee, his eyes opening in boundless astonishment.

A shiver ran through the Irishman's frame. Fearing he was coming to, Peppermint took possession of the knife and began hurriedly to tear some strips from the coarse ticking of the cot.

With these he bound McGee tight and fast, then seated himself and calmly waited for the Irishman to regain his senses.

The latter had a hard head and, although the blow had, apparently, been sufficient to crush the skull of an alligator, he was not long in coming around.

"Hello!" exclaimed the prisoner, as the Irishman opened his eyes and attempted to lift his hand to his bleeding and aching head, "how dew yeou find yerself this fine mornin', Mister Paddy McGee? Yeou was uncommon peart on'y a little while ago."

McGee replied only with a venomous glare.

"I reckon, naow Mister Primrose hired you to play this leetle game. Hope he agreed tew pay yer doctor bills intew the bargain. It'll cost more'n a dollar, I allaow, to git that head tied up like it ort tew be."

Before it was fairly light a step was heard in the hall without, and Caleb Primrose poked his head cautiously through the open door of the inner prison. The sight that met his gaze must have astonished him considerably, for he drew back with a smothered curse.

He had not expected to find the tables turned upon McGee in this style. He it was who had fired the dastardly shot through the grated window. Finding it had failed to accomplish its purpose he had paid McGee to assassinate Peppermint during the quiet hours of the night.

The failure of his plans wrought him up to a pitch of fury; and an instant later he presented himself at the prison-door with a cocked revolver, intending to shoot Peppermint down in cold blood, release McGee, and lay the blame upon some party or parties unknown.

What was his surprise, therefore, to find himself covered with a derringer, which Peppermint hastily plucked from the bosom of his shirt.

"I've got the drop on yeou," the latter shouted, "an' ef yeou so much as bat yer eye, I'll put a bullet intew it!"

CHAPTER IV.

"A FRIEND IN NEED."

STEPS were heard in the corridor of the little jail, and Lucas Waldo appeared as a spectator of the tableau.

Primrose thrust his revolver back into its place and turned to greet him, with a sickly laugh.

"You're just in time to prevent a tragedy, it seems!" he said, forcing a smile. "I have no doubt I would have been a dead man in another minute."

"Been having some kind of a difficulty, eh?" Waldo asked in surprise, as he peered through the open door at the bound form of the Irishman.

"As I said, you arrived just in time to prevent a tragedy. That fellow would have shot me down in another instant."

"Naow yeou're a-puttin' it jest a leetle strong, ain't yeou?" Peppermint queried.

"My story can be verified by the jailer. You see in what condition I found him—trussed up like a fowl ready for basting."

"Tell the gentleman your story, Mickey. How this road-agent tied you up, and was just on the point of escaping when I appeared and blocked his game."

McGee was quick-witted and rattled off a really plausible yarn.

"I don't believe a word of the story!" protested Waldo. "That Irishman is lying. Any one can see it in his eyes."

Primrose's face became ashy pale and his fingers twitched nervously.

"Then you doubt my statement?"

"You may construe my words to suit yourself!" Waldo replied, coldly. "I say he did not

lead the road-agents on the occasion referred to."

"I shall take the greatest pleasure in the world in proving that you are wrong."

Primrose modulated his tones with an effort, but he could not quench the angry fire that burned in his vicious eyes.

"This town has been cursed with a most villainous set of cut-throats and foot-pads, for several months past, and I intend to see that they are weeded out. I am also glad to say there are other gentlemen in the camp who think just as I do and are willing to assist in escorting these gentry from our midst by the necktie route."

"Quite a burst of virtuous indignation, truly!" sneered Waldo. "One would think that you were a censor of public morals instead of the keeper of a notorious gambling hell."

Primrose fairly choked with impotent fury, and more than once did his hand creep slyly to the butt of his revolver.

Josh Peppermint's eagle-like eyes were fixed upon his face, however, and Primrose knew full well that his first movement would be a signal for a shot from the deadly derringer.

"It is your inning, Mr. Waldo!"

He backed toward the outer door, as he said it, knowing that if he remained longer he would be tempted into some act which he would doubtless have cause to regret.

Then, with a malignant glance at the Yankee, he pulled his hat down over his eyes and strode furiously down the street.

"The wolf!" exclaimed Waldo, looking after the retreating figure.

"We can dispense with your valuable services, McGee, for a little while. You know me and you know that my word is as good as my bond. I will become surety for Mr. Peppermint's safe-keeping. You can return again in ten minutes. I would advise you to use the time in committing that beautiful little story to memory so that you can tell it with a greater simplicity and apparent candor."

McGee slouched sulkily away, muttering maledictions dark and deep.

"And now please inform me how it happened that I found you so strangely situated a little while ago!" Waldo asked, turning to Peppermint. "Selim requested me to call on you early this morning. He will be absent from town a number of hours, probably, and he thought you might wish to confer with some one."

Peppermint detailed the incidents of the night, and asked:

"What kind o' a show, naow, do yeou think mebbe they'll give me?"

"Not much, I'm afraid. You are to be brought before Judge Lynch, at one o'clock, and if Selim does not accomplish his mission by that time I have some dread of the result. It may be, though, that I can rally a sufficient number of well-disposed men to force a postponement of the—"

"Hangin'!" interposed Peppermint, seeing that he hesitated.

"Primrose must be weakenin' though, er he wouldn't 'a' tried the game he did las' night."

"He simply wanted to make assurance doubly sure!" was the answer.

Waldo then made known the cause of Selim's temporary absence from the town, which will be revealed in its proper place, and proceeded to a discussion of a line of defense.

The ten minutes became twenty before he recalled McGee and took his departure.

"Don't allow yourself to become discouraged!" he cried, with a warm grasp of the hand.

"You'll come out on top, yet, my good fellow."

"Hope I may. But, I say, boss, won't you see that my hoss has his mornin' feed on thistle an' pine burrs?"

And Waldo departed, smiling.

CHAPTER V.

JUDGE LYNCH.

THE only law known to Bullion City was the code of Judge Lynch. It is true the town boasted of a mayor and marshal, who was also the jailer, but their functions consisted mainly in administering the laws of the erratic judge, who seditions were carried out with such promptness and vigor that appeals and new evidence always came too late to benefit the accused.

Lemuel Silvertop was the mayor, and he was a fitting companion to Mickey McGee, the marshal and jailer. Both were tools of Primrose and wholly subservient to his wishes.

Silvertop was a man of sixty, whose bristly, white hair was clipped closely to his head, after the fashion of a pugilist. He had a heavy jaw, a watery eye and the head of a bull-dog. His real name was unknown, certainly no one believed it to be Silvertop.

To judge by appearances, one would be safe in asserting that he was a worn-out cracksmen and burglar from the East, who was vegetating in the security of Bullion City, and who would not be likely to leave the camp as long as he could obtain a dollar or a drink from his friend and patron, Caleb Primrose.

It was through Primrose's influence that he had been elevated to his present position as the dispenser of border justice, and he repaid his chief with favorable decisions.

With such a man as Judge Lynch, Primrose felt that he could grind his enemies to powder.

Before this man Peppermint was brought. Ordinary courts, governed by statutory enactments, presume that a man is innocent until he is proven guilty; but Silvertop's court was not an ordinary court. There the presumptions were all against the accused. If charged with horse-stealing—the most flagrant offense known in the wild West—the prisoner was expected to prove, especially if Primrose was the prosecuting witness, that it was morally and physically impossible that he could be guilty.

Peppermint saw at a glance that he could expect neither mercy nor justice from Silvertop. Nevertheless, he determined to make as vigorous a defense as possible, and hoped to be able to prolong the trial until the arrival of the Silver Sport.

The court was convened in the open air in front of the Primrose Palace, "so that the judge wouldn't have to wait too long when he sent for a drink," as a bystander sagely remarked.

A platform was made by laying boards across a pair of saw-horses, and on this the august judge seated himself in state, with Peppermint close at his right hand. Evidently the dignity and majesty of the court had to be sustained. As for the lesser fry, such as witnesses and spectators, the cobblestones of the street were good enough.

"What's the charge ag'in' this 'ere feller?" demanded Silvertop, with a magisterial frown.

Primrose pushed forward through the crowd.

"May it please the court," he said, with a deferential bow, that greatly tickled Silvertop's vanity, "the prisoner, Josh Peppermint, as he calls himself, is accused of holding up the stage on the Rocky Butte trail, night before last."

"Nighabout ez bad ez hoss-stealin'!" exclaimed Silvertop, solemnly, turning his watery eyes upon Peppermint. "What hev ye got to say about it?"

"Thet he can't prove it."

"Don't hev to prove it, my boy!" said the court, sternly. "You must purjuice an alleyby. If ye warn't there, I reckon it won't be hard fur ye to prove whar ye wus at thet identikal time."

"Isn't that just a little strong?" asked Mr. Waldo, elbowing his way to a place in front of the judge. "I appear as a friend of the defendant, and, although I deny emphatically that this court has any power in the premises, we are willing to take our chances if ordinary court principles and rulings are allowed to prevail."

At this there was a cheer; and it was plainly evident that Waldo had succeeded in collecting a number of friends about him.

Primrose glanced quickly around; and, noticing the number of Waldo's supporters, proceeded to lower his demands.

"My friend Waldo is quite correct," he observed, smoothly. "We want nothing but justice. But justice we will have, though the heavens fall. We will waive the precedents of the past, in this case, in deference to his wishes. It is not necessary, your Honor, to take anything for granted. We have an abundance of evidence."

He then called the names of the three ruffians who were in the stage when it was stopped by road-agents.

They identified Peppermint as the masked man who had ridden the burro, and were especially fierce in their denunciation of him.

Mickey McGee detailed minutely the supposed circumstances of Peppermint's attempted flight from the jail. Primrose bolstered this with his concocted testimony, and matters began to look black for the Yankee.

Ominous growls arose from the throng, mingled with threatening cries.

Silvertop sent for a drink, and when he had gulped it down he turned upon Peppermint, with owl-like gravity.

"It's ez clear a case ez I ever see!" he exclaimed, winking rapidly to relieve his eyes of their superabundant moisture. "Tain't necessary to purjuice any more evidence. The court's made up its mind, an' all the evidence

that c'd be scraped wouldn't be likely to change it."

"You will allow us, at least, to introduce our side of the case!" protested Waldo.

"He's like the Dutch justice I read about once," Peppermint observed, with a smile. "After the first witness had finished he told the lawyers to go ahead, but that they musn't talk loud enough to wake him; that the case was settled as far as he was concerned, but he intended to snooze awhile afore renderin' judgment. 'Peared afterwards that he was afeard ef he heerd any more he would git sort o' tangled an' wouldn't know how tew decide."

The audacity of this speech fairly took away "his Honor's" breath. For a full half-minute he glared at Peppermint in speechless amazement, then he thundered:

"I find the prisoner guilty; an' he shall be hung at wunst untel he's ez dead ez a herrin'!"

Mickey McGee sprung upon the platform with a rope and the crowd became a sea of surging and shrieking heads.

Above this wild tumult came the thunder of hoofs and the ringing cheery voice of the Silver Sport.

The clamor instantly subsided, even McGee allowed the rope to trail at his feet and turned about in excited expectancy—and all eyes were turned toward Sunny Selim, who was coming up the street at a swinging gallop.

A number of men rode at his heels, and before him he drove a little burro, to the back of which was bound a tall and powerfully built man.

The throng instinctively fell back as this cavalcade approached.

Sunny Selim drove the burro, with its strange burden, right in front of the platform upon which Silvertop was seated.

"Here's your road-agent!" he cried, with withering scorn. "A nice set of fellows, you are, to harness up an innocent man out of pure spite."

"Poor old Silvertop knew not what to do, and so ordered another drink.

When he had swallowed it, he passed his hands flatteringly over his closely cropped head, glanced appealingly at Primrose and then ran his eyes helplessly over the sea of upturned faces.

"This is a—rather a late date fer the introduction of new testimony!" he faltered. "The judgment o' the court hez been pronounced, an' I don't see ez we kin reely do anything more'n to see that it's kerried out."

Then, gaining courage from the flow of his words:

"It is the order o' Judge Lynch that the pris'ner be hanged by the neck, untel he's ez dead ez a herrin'!"

Again McGee sprung forward with his rope.

"Drop that!" Selim commanded, leveling a cocked revolver, and the rope dropped from McGee's hands, as if it had been a red-hot bar of iron.

A wild cheer went up from the throats of Waldo's men. Silvertop's florid face took on a sickly hue and his hands shook.

"Now, I demand that we be given a hearing!" cried the Silver Sport, thrusting a revolver under "his Honor's" bulbous nose.

Silvertop was almost voiceless with terror, but he managed to stammer a consent, and Selim ordered his prisoner to be hoisted upon the platform.

In form and general appearance the man did really resemble Peppermint, and when masked might be readily taken for him. But he had a most villainous countenance, and a terrible scar, ghastly and red, extended across his forehead.

"Gentlemen," said the Silver Sport, ignoring Judge Lynch altogether and addressing the crowd, among which he recognized many friends, "how I learned of the hiding place of this scamp is too long a story to tell now, and I don't know that it's material, anyhow.

"I was in the stage when it was halted by the burro-rider, and I knew that the fellow was not Josh Peppermint."

"Now, I am here to prove it."

He pressed the tube of the revolver against the livid scar on the forehead of his prisoner.

"You know me!" he cried. "Acknowledge to the truth, or, as I'm a living man, I'll spatter these boards with your worthless brains.

"Gentlemen, I protest!" exclaimed Primrose, in evident alarm. "Is it fair to extort a confession from a man in that kind of style?"

"Out with it," shouted Selim, "or take the consequences."

"I—I was hired to do it!" faltered the trembling wretch. "The man who paid me—"

"This is an outrage!" cried Primrose, wildly. He gained the stage at a bound and rushed

upon the Silver Sport with the fury of a madman. The threatening revolver was sent spinning into the street; and, as Selim turned to meet the furious charge, the road-agent leaped down and ran like a frightened deer.

A scene of indescribable confusion followed. Men shouted and screamed, pistols cracked, the air grew sulphurous with curses, and in the midst of it all Silvertop tumbled over in a dead faint.

Selim wrenched himself from the restraining grasp of Primrose, and darted in pursuit of the fugitive. Others joined in the chase, and it seemed for a time that the road-agent would be retaken.

But he doubled on his trail like a hunted fox, and darted through the open doors of the Primrose Palace. The building was at once surrounded, and although Primrose ostensibly led the search in person, the rascal could not be unearthed.

"I thought you were using unwarranted measures with the fellow," Primrose said, in explanation of the part he had taken, "and attempted to stop you, as an act of simple justice. But when the scoundrel ran that way I knew at once that he was guilty. It's plain, of course, now, that Peppermint is innocent, and if you can find this fellow, I will take great pleasure in helping to put a rope around his neck."

That evening, Josh Peppermint rode triumphantly through the streets of Bullion City, mounted on his little burro, with his weapons restored, and no man ventured to molest him.

It had been a day of defeats for Primrose. His eyes gleamed revengefully, as they fell on the Yankee's tall form, but he closed his teeth with an angry click, and bided his time.

CHAPTER VI.

THE FLOWER BRIGADE.

If the baffled men who sought so diligently for the escaped road-agent could have peeped, that night, into the subterranean apartment beneath the Primrose Palace, they would have made a discovery to astonish them.

The existence to this underground chamber was known only to the initiated few. There were several entrances to it, but they were so ingeniously concealed as to almost defy detection. There were tunnels, also, opening into other houses at considerable distances away to make escape easy in case of a raid.

On this night a large, if not goodly, company was assembled. Something of importance was evidently up for discussion, and belated arrivals continued to make their appearance until the night verged on the morning.

Chief among this motley array of villains was Primrose himself; and he was fitly accompanied by his satellites, Mickey McGee and Lemuel Silvertop. The escaped road-agent was also there, with the three who had borne testimony against Peppermint that afternoon.

Each wore an artificial primrose on the lapel of his coat, thus attesting their allegiance to the proprietor of the Primrose Palace.

Entrance was gained to the apartment much in the same way that admittance is gained to secret lodges. Indeed, to a stranger, the meeting would have seemed very much like a Masonic gathering. Three raps were given at the inner door. These were responded to by three raps and the whispered query, "Whither bound?" The reply was invariably, "Over the primrose path!"

After considerable waiting, Primrose seated himself at a table in one end of the room and rapped for order.

"Members of the Flower Brigade," he said, rising, when order had been obtained. "I have called you together to-night to warn you of a new peril. Many of you were present at the trial of the supposed Yankee this afternoon, and will know what I mean without much explanation.

"You know how we failed in accomplishing our purpose of hanging the fellow, through the interposition of two men, Lucas Waldo and the Silver Sport.

"Josh Peppermint, as he is pleased to call himself, is not a green countryman at all. Neither is he a 'Down-east' Yankee, as you might suppose from his dialect.

"The dialect and the appearance of rural veridancy are assumed as a disguise. His true name is Sydney Sheldon, and he is one of the most dangerous of the detective fraternity."

There was a murmur of anger and astonishment at this declaration.

"Our friends further east warned me that Peppermint was on his way to Bullion City, and also gave me a description of the character he would assume. So I laid a trap for him.

"Lengthy Jim, here, is about Peppermint's hight. I had him mask himself and lead the attack on the stage, mounted on a burro similar to the one Peppermint rides. I believed we could thus fasten a charge against the detective that would place a rope around his neck and rid us of his attentions. You know how it resulted."

He stopped for an instant to note the effect of his words. The stillness which had been almost painful, was broken by a wild clamor, amid which could be heard vindictive denunciations of Waldo and the Silver Sport.

"Realizing that it wouldn't do to take any unnecessary risks, I attempted with the aid of Mickey McGee, to down Peppermint in the jail, last night, but failed.

"So you see, friends and comrades of the primroses, we have made a bad mess of it."

He stopped again and a stern look came into his eyes. His voice, too, changed as he continued:

"Now, what shall be done with the man, who, even though death apparently stares him in the face, proposes to reveal the secrets of the Flower Brigade, in order to save his own worthless carcass?"

As these ominous words fell from the lips of his chief, Lengthy Sim shrunk against the wall in an agony of terror.

"You who were in attendance on the court of Judge Lynch, this afternoon, will understand me.

"That scoundrel there"—pointing at the trembling wretch—"that perjured and cowardly villain is the man to whom I refer!"

A storm of hisses and snarls swept through the room, and Lengthy Jim crept appealingly to the feet of his enraged chief.

Primrose heeded him no more than the earth beneath his feet.

"That man, who swore by the most terrible oaths to stand by us and with us, and to never reveal a secret of this organization or the name of a member, though he should be torn limb from limb in an effort to extort a confession from him, was on the point of revealing all, this afternoon. Only by my prompt interference was he prevented from doing so."

A wail for mercy went up from the pallid lips of the man prostrated at Primrose's feet.

"He who had no mercy now cries unto you for mercy!" Primrose sneered. "Members of the Flower Brigade, do you know what would have been the result if our secrets had been thus revealed? Bullion City would have been shaken as if by an earthquake. Every one of you would have been hunted down and shot like so many wild animals."

The reckless bandits were becoming lashed into fury, and their growls grew more ominous and deadly.

"I didn't intend to reveal anything!" pleaded the hapless wretch.

"Silence, you dog!" roared Primrose. "The words were upon your lips, ready for utterance.

"Men, comrades, members of the Flower Brigade! I leave it to you to decide what shall be done with a man who thus disregards our solemn oath!"

A howl of fury arose, which must have reached the street, had not the apartment been truly subterranean.

"Death!" shouted the frantic bandits. "Down with all traitors!"

"It is well!" exclaimed Primrose.

He waved his hand. A half-dozen sturdy villains threw themselves upon Lengthy Jim. He struggled and fought like a hyena. It was useless. He was quickly overpowered and hurled, shrieking, to the earthen floor, and the primrose torn from his coat.

When he was securely bound and gagged, he was tied fast to a chair. This was lifted by four men, and then Primrose led the way through one of the underground galleries.

From this they emerged, through a concealed entrance, into a stable in the rear of the Primrose Palace.

The night was waning and the full moon was low down in the western sky.

Leaving the stable, by a rear door, the solemn and ghostly company proceeded into the timber of the foot-hills.

A half an hour later they crept back like guilty things that feared the coming light; and the body of the murdered road-agent swung mournfully and ghastly in the freshening breeze.

CHAPTER VII.

"RARE, PALE MARGARET."

A PRETTY little cottage clung to a hillside, just beyond the unsightly suburbs of Bullion

City. Climbing plants trailed themselves above the windows and a rose bush in full bloom, sent its fragrance through the open door.

A canary sung in its gilded cage above a work-table, at which a young woman was sitting.

There was about the place a cheerful air of home comfort, sadly lacking in most of the dwellings of that feverish mining town. The rooms, though small, were well kept and tidy and bore mute testimony to the orderly industry of the fair housekeeper.

This was the home of William Caxtonbluff, cheery Bill—a man of honor and good heart, who had many friends and few enemies and was respected by all.

Caxton was an assayer of ores and only his stern integrity had kept him from becoming wealthy. He would not lend himself to the petty schemes of unprincipled men who desired to foist worthless mining property on an unsuspecting public. Other assayers might do that, but Bill Caxton, never!

If the assay showed that ore was worthless or comparatively so, all the wealth of the mountains would not induce him to assert otherwise. This was the secret cause of his humble position; for it is, unfortunately, true, that windy mine-boomers, with a worthless hole in the ground, far outnumber the honest men who have legitimate and valuable mining stocks for sale.

The young woman seated at the work-table, above which the canary was thrilling so cheerily, was Caxton's daughter and housekeeper, Margaret. She was certainly a young woman of exceptional beauty. Her open, intelligent face, with its dark-blue eyes, aquiline nose, and mouth like a Cupid's bow, was set off by a mass of golden-brown hair; and her form was grace and comeliness personified.

She smiled as she bent above her work, as if her thoughts were pleasant. Occasionally she looked down the little path that led past the dainty picket fence.

She was evidently expecting some one; and soon the sounds of manly footsteps sent the blood in warm surges to her face.

A little later the Silver Sport turned into the path and came toward the house. He plucked a couple of buds from the flowering rose bush, as he passed it, and when Margaret arose to meet him, he handed her one and pinned the other to his handsome, Mexican jacket.

"Only rose bush I know of in the country," he said, with a smile, "and so I took the liberty. Name the penalty and it shall be paid, even to the half of my fortune."

"Which would be about how much at the present time?" with a lifting of her delicate eyebrows.

"Well, it wouldn't make you a great deal richer nor me appreciably poorer!" was the laughing reply.

He helped himself to a chair, with the utmost nonchalance.

"I hear you have been getting into trouble again?" she said, pouting her red lips.

"Who was the bearer of evil tidings this time?"

"Father!"

"And he condemned me for breaking away from those road-agents last night?"

"No; he seemed pleased with it, but said you were rather too reckless."

"Well, my recklessness saved to Mr. Waldo about ten thousand dollars, so he informed me."

"So much as that?"

"And, by the way, Jennie behaved beautifully during the trying ordeal."

"She was here this morning," Margaret replied, eying him sharply, "and do you know I'm afraid she is on the verge of falling in love with you?"

"Pooh!" with a light laugh. "Jennie is too sensible a girl for that. And besides her father is not over-much pleased with some of my habits, I fancy."

"But fathers do not control the hearts of their daughters," she persisted.

"Jennie will get over any little tenderness she may have for me, as soon as Peppermint arrives. It is ridiculous to think of her falling in love with me. Now, Peppermint is really a handsome fellow—when not on dress parade, you know—and I'm sure Jennie can't help liking him, when she knows him as he is."

He noticed that she seemed relieved by the statement, and laughed heartily.

"Not jealous, I hope?"

"No; but—"

"Under the circumstances you prefer that I should remain true to my first love. Or, to put it in another way, that I should be off with the old love before I am on with the new."

He leaned forward and kissed her lightly on the cheek.

"All that is eminently proper, no doubt, but it sounds funny, under the circumstances."

"I was not thinking of it in that way," she said, her pink cheeks glowing.

Then, noticing the mark left by the bullet, her eyes filled with surprise and alarm.

"You were hurt in the fight last night, and have tried to conceal it by combing your hair over the wound!"

"Didn't Jennie mention it?" he asked.

"No! How did it happen, and why didn't you speak of it?"

"One question at a time, my dear, or you will rout me, horse, foot and dragoons."

A tender light came into his eyes.

"Jennie is a girl of rare discretion! I'll warrant she told everything else, but left out that part of the story, for fear of alarming you."

He then described the manner in which he received the wound, and told how Jennie had bathed it, and stopped the flow of blood.

"She didn't tell me these things!" he explained. "I wormed them out of the stage-driver. He is an honest fellow and brave as a lion—and garrulous as an old woman. He has told the tale so often already, that I have narrowly escaped becoming a hero."

"And would be one quite, in my eyes, at least," she said, "if you would only keep away from that hateful Primrose Palace."

"Impossible, my dear!" he replied. "No need to tell you why, for I have already told you a score of times. Perhaps, after Peppermint comes, it will not be necessary for me to go there quite so often."

"When do you expect Peppermint?"

"At any hour now. He was at Rocky Butte yesterday. I saw him and had a talk with him. In fact that was my purpose in going there. When he arrives I will turn over a good deal of the work to him."

"I wish you were out of the business!" she exclaimed. "Do you know remarks are already being made about your visits to me? It is the gossip of the neighborhood that I have accepted as a lover a man who is a confirmed gambler."

There was a pained look in her eyes.

"I hope you do not really care for these remarks!" he said, anxiously. "For a time it is absolutely necessary that I should be Sunny Selim, the Silver Sport. In no other way can I perform the task which I have set myself."

"Your father, does he regard this masquerading with displeasure?"

He watched the varying emotions revealed in her changeable countenance, as he put the question.

"It is distasteful to him," she acknowledged, frankly, "though he does not condemn it."

He laughed lightly, to conceal the shade of annoyance on his face.

"At any rate I am progressing in the good graces of Mr. Waldo. That was a lucky affair last night for me. It elevated me greatly in his estimation."

"And in the estimation of his daughter?" with a questioning smile.

"Yes, in the estimation of his daughter. And, if you say much more on that subject, I shall begin to believe you are really jealous."

His arm stole slyly around her slender waist and he pressed another kiss upon her pretty, pouting lips.

"What is that old song?"

"O, don't be sorrowful, darling,
O, don't be sorrowful, pray!
For, taking the year together, my dear,
We always will find the May!"

He sung it over softly, tapping the carpet with his heavy boot.

"The May is coming for us soon, my dear! Then I hope, as my wife, you will be able to hold up your head with the most favored lady in the land."

He drew her to his breast.

The senseless braying of a burro cut the morning air like the blast of a fog-horn.

He drew himself up in an absurdly dignified fashion and broke into a loud laugh, and Margaret hastily straightened her tumbled hair.

"It is our friend, Peppermint," he said, beamingly. "I suppose that burro never entered a town in its life without announcing its coming in that fashion. And Josh really seems to delight in the music of its voice."

He stepped to a window which looked out on the trail from Rocky Butte. The sight revealed almost sent him into convulsions of laughter.

"Josh Peppermint without his burro would

not be Josh Peppermint at all. Come here, Margaret, if you wish to see something worth looking at."

She came to the window at his request, and gazed at Peppermint and his ridiculous steed in amused astonishment.

"Which is the handsomer, my dear, think you?" asked the Silver Sport. "Peppermint or the burro?"

Her only reply was a rippling, girlish laugh.

The burro was crawling, tortoise-like, along the rocky trail, and Peppermint was swinging his long legs and singing, "The Girl I Left Behind Me."

"If Jennie Waldo ever falls in love with that fellow, he will have to improve wonderfully in his personal appearance," she observed, archly.

"Which would be the work of only a few minutes. Let him discard that shock of hair and that shock of a hat, rid himself of those ridiculous clothes, remove the brick-dust coloring and rub some of the lines out of his face, and he would become an entirely different fellow, so far as looks are concerned."

"I never knew a man who could come up to Peppermint in successful disguising. The real Sydney Sheldon looks no more like that corn-field scare-crow than I do."

The burro and its rider passed from sight around the bend in the trail and entered the principal street of Bullion City.

"Now, my dear, I must go!" Selim exclaimed, pressing a last kiss upon the fair face beside him. "I must see how Peppermint introduces himself to the worthy citizens of Bullion City, and be near to help him, in case he needs assistance."

He hurried away, and, as the reader knows, was able to be of vast service to Peppermint in his first encounter with the proprietor of the Primrose Palace.

CHAPTER VIII.

TWO OF A KIND.

On the afternoon following the hanging of the road-agent, Josh Peppermint was riding gawkily about the suburbs of Bullion City, staring owlishly at the various sights attractive to the eyes of a "tenderfoot."

After a time the burro turned, apparently of its own notion, into the Rocky Butte trail. As it advanced slowly along this flinty highway, it grew lazier; and, finally, like the totally-depraved creature it was, altogether refused to proceed.

This necessitated a vigorous application of the spur, and a scene of pitching ensued which baffles description. Never was such "bucking" seen by the "oldest inhabitant."

Peppermint seemed determined not to be dislodged from his seat, and, when the waltzing commenced in earnest, he locked his long legs together under the belly of the little brute, twined his arms around its neck and held on like "grim death," or the man who, for a five-dollar bill, attempts to ride the trick mule in the arena of the circus.

Failing to dismount its rider in this way, the burro plunged viciously forward and then broke into a rattling gallop.

All at once, just as it reached a point opposite the Caxton cottage, the burro stopped. Stopped, with premeditation and malice aforethought and with such a bending of its neck and stiffening of its legs that Peppermint was shot forward over its expansive ears like a ball from a siege-gun.

He landed with a terrible crash and failed to rise; and the burro made a wild dash for the adjacent foot-hills.

Honest Bill Caxton, who had been watching the entire performance from the cottage window, now ran out to the trail, accompanied by the Silver Sport.

Peppermint was apparently unconscious, and, after a hasty examination, they lifted him tenderly between them and carried him into the house, where a bed had been speedily prepared by Margaret for his reception.

When Margaret and her father left the room, which they did in the course of a few moments, Peppermint looked up serenely from the pillow and asked, with a drawl:

"Wa-al, haow did yeou like the show?"

The face of the Silver Sport, which had up to that time held an anxious expression, became wreathed in smiles.

"Excellent, but the acting was almo-t too perfect. So perfect, in fact, that I really began to fear you were seriously hurt."

"I told yeou that Jakie could work the trick to perfection."

He looked anxiously about and then shot an inquiring glance through the window.

"Pull thet winder blind, will yeou? I'd rather set up. Never like to lay in bed onless I'm sleepy. I kin talk better in a cheer."

Selim complied with the request. Then Peppermint dragged his lanky form from beneath the coverings and seated himself in a rocker.

"I was watched, just as I said I would be!" he asserted, discarding the dialect. "Primrose's men have been following me all day. It was the only way I could get here without arousing too much suspicion."

"Just before Jakie proceeded to give that exhibition of his bucking qualities, I noticed one of them on the corner above. Of course he saw the performance, and no doubt thinks I'm lying at death's door."

"Waldo said you had some news for me! May I ask what it is?"

"Well, I wanted to tell you that there is a deep cellar or subterranean chamber under the Primrose Palace," replied the Silver Sport. "I have suspected as much for some time. Yesterday, when that burro-riding road-agent concealed himself so completely that the closest search failed to disclose his hiding-place, I was thoroughly convinced of the correctness of my suspicions."

"While the play was at its highest last night, and the interest centered upon the gaming-tables, I made my way by slow degrees to the rear of the apartment. There is a heavily curtained window at that end, and by drawing the curtains about me, I could see all that occurred in the room without being myself seen."

There was a light tap on the door leading into the adjoining room, and the Silver Sport stopped suddenly in his narration.

"What is it?" he called.

"There is a man coming down the trail. He has been standing at the corner above for quite a little while. I think he intends coming to the house."

It was the voice of Margaret that conveyed the warning.

"Great gov'nor!" exclaimed Peppermint, springing into bed and assuming a look of the most intense pain.

"All right! We will be ready for him!"

Margaret retreated; and Peppermint gave a hollow groan that brought an involuntary smile to the face of the sport.

The man marched up to the door quite boldly, and doffed his hat at Margaret.

"A lot o' the boys asked me ef I wouldn't come down hyer and see how the stranger, Mr. Peppermint, is gittin' along. We heerd that his burro throwed him tremendous hard."

"You can see for yourself!" said Caxton, whose conscience would not allow him to tell even the whitest of lies. "He was pitched from his burro and is now in bed in the other room."

He threw the room door open as he made the statement.

The spy of the Flower Brigade availed himself eagerly of the offered privilege.

As he stepped into the room he saw nothing whatever calculated to arouse his suspicions. Peppermint was lying in the bed, which was considerably tumbled, as if he had been tossing restlessly about. His eyes were closed, one hand rested limply on his breast, and the heavy breathing denoted that he was unconscious.

The Silver Sport was gently manipulating a palm-leaf fan; and when the man entered, arose softly and gave him a chair.

"Bad hurt, is he?" asked the spy, trying to look sympathetic.

"I'm afraid so!" replied Selim. "He seems to be unconscious; the trail is hard and he received a terrible fall."

"Why don't you send for a doctor?"

The question was pertinent and one that might have been anticipated.

Selim had not thought of it, although he replied promptly enough:

"Waldo is something of a surgeon and seems to be a friend to the fellow. We think of carrying him over there, after a little."

The man knew that Waldo was pretty well versed in medicine and the explanation satisfied him.

He picked up his hat, which he had deposited on the floor, twirled it around in his hands and arose to depart.

"Well, might's well be a-goin', I reckon. The boys'll be anxious to know how he's a-gittin' along. I told 'em I wouldn't be gone more'n ten minnits an' time's about up!"

Selim knew who the "boys" were, but he said nothing and the man backed through the door, apologizing for having disturbed them.

Not until he had reached the trail did Pepper-

mint stir. Then he threw the covers off with a light laugh and sat up.

"Well, I'm glad the fellow came!" he said. "Seeing is believing, you know, and he will now be satisfied. He never would have been, I'm afraid, otherwise. He will bear to Primrose an account that will completely throw him off his guard."

"It's lucky you chanced to say that I am to be taken to Waldo's!"

"Couldn't think of any other place to take you!" laughed the Silver Sport. "If Waldo hadn't been something of a doctor I'd have been stuck."

"Well, we'll discuss that presently!" said Peppermint, seating himself again in the chair. "Just now I'm extremely anxious to hear the rest of your story. You were saying, I believe, that you had concealed yourself behind the curtains of the rear window in the Primrose Palace gaming-room. What then?"

"Yes; I succeeded in gaining that position without attracting the attention of any one."

After awhile I noticed that men were, one by one, forsaking the play, and entering the hall that communicated with the back yard. When I saw that I was not long in also worming my way into that hall.

"It was as dark as the traditional stack of black cats, but I had been in it a number of times before and so experienced no difficulty."

"I was stumped at first, for when I tried the door I found it locked. As there was no other means of egress that I knew of I couldn't imagine where the men had gone to."

"While I was still puzzling over this another man entered. I crouched in the furthest corner, though I don't believe he could have seen me if I had stood within a foot of him."

"Advancing almost to me, he turned sharply about and rapped three times upon the wall. The raps were repeated from the opposite side. Then I heard the whispered question, 'Whither bound?' and the reply, 'Over the primrose path.'"

"To my amazement, a door opened in the solid wall, at a place where I would never have thought of looking for a door. This he passed through, and then the door closed as suddenly and mysteriously as it had been opened."

"I thought I could detect the outline of a stairway descending into the depths. However, I am not very positive of that; but I am sure the man who entered sunk downward as if descending a stairway."

"This is a most important discovery!" exclaimed Peppermint, when the story had ended. "I think we can make good use of it. And that recalls to my mind another subject I wished to speak of."

"As Josh Peppermint I have been spotted and am constantly watched. In that character, therefore, I can do nothing. It makes it absolutely necessary that I should assume an additional disguise."

"You told this spy, who called on us a few moments ago, that I would be carried to Mr. Waldo's, because he was something of a physician and a friend of mine."

"Now, that statement plays right into our hands. I can remain at Waldo's, or at least pretend to, and in some other disguise prosecute the work in hand."

"I needn't tell you that I intend to penetrate to that secret chamber beneath the Primrose Palace and lay bare its secrets. You have already guessed that those are my intentions. As Josh Peppermint I can't accomplish that, now, but I can and will in some other character."

"I would suggest that you send at once for a litter, and as soon as it comes convey me away from here."

The suggestion was complied with and a half hour later, Josh Peppermint, who had apparently recovered his consciousness but was seemingly in great pain, was borne slowly and cautiously to the elegant home of Lucas Waldo.

CHAPTER IX.

"OVER THE PRIMROSE PATH."

"OH, my eye, hyer's a fresh 'un!" cried Silver-top, wiping from his purple face the rain of tears that had been pumped from his watery eyes by an inordinate fit of laughter. "Some 'un name it an' take it, won't ye?"

A tall, stoop-shouldered German, of uncertain age and apparently fresh from Castle Garden, was swinging up the street, his heavy shoes clatteringly keeping time to the "Lauderback," which rolled from his tongue in a jolly, trolling fashion.

"Say, Dutch," the gray-headed reprobate shouted, as the German came within hearing, "you'd better get yer life insured. The sparrers

'll take ye fer a cabbage an' pick ye to pieces afore night."

The German stopped, stared curiously at the speaker and then broke into a heavy laugh.

"Vbat olt sheep-he't vhas dot sheakin' to me py mineselluf like I vhas a saurkraut Dutchman? Dot vhas a boody goot shoke, ain'd it? Now lookee here, you vheeler! Do you see somedings creen by dot eye oudt?"

He lifted the lid of his right eye with his fingers and stared hard at Silver-top.

"I vhas six mont' in dis gountry, already. Der sbarrows vhat dries to ead me oop vor a he't uff gabbage vhill vhint deir graws shoost shlobbin' oafar mit a nest vnull uff sbarrow-hawks!" The words were accompanied by such a ludicrous attempt at swagger that the loafers in front of the Primrose Palace broke, as if by a common impulse, into a series of derisive yells.

Mortification and anger were plainly revealed in the face of the German.

"Yaw!" he snorted. "Dot vhas more foonas anypody efer see in 'levendeen vheeks und sixteen Soondays. I dinks me petter I go py mineselluf avhay vor a leedle vwhile und hoont mit a microscope vor dot shoke."

"When will we see his like again?" Silver-top sung, slightly changing the first line of a ballad popular at the time; and the boisterous crowd broke into another series of yells.

Primrose who had been listening to the verbal duel from the doorway, also laughed heartily at this sally.

This snatch of song evidently angered the Dutchman almost beyond endurance.

He threw off his long-tailed coat, spat upon his hands and cracked his shoes heavily upon the pavement.

"Lookee here, now you vheellers! I comes me py dis gountry oafar to vhint some vhook. I nod mooch gelt haben. Eud I vhas a honest man; un I gan vhip de bite off uff any vheeler vhat makes dhose shokes by me."

The loungers laughed inordinately, but no one seemed inclined to accept the challenge; and after waiting a few moments the German replaced his coat.

"I dinks me all uff dem pull-dogs must haf dheir teedh vrom dheir he't's pullt oudt!" he said, dryly. "I vhas peen tolt dot dhis vas a vhighitin' down. Uff dot vhas so der vhighitin' mens musd pe avhey py dheir reladives vhisitin'."

He glared about even as he said this, showing that he rather expected some one to spring upon him.

"You were wrongfully informed," said Primrose. "We used to fight a little, just to get a graveyard started, you know; but now, that that has been accomplished, there i-n't a more peaceable town between here and the salt water."

"Vhas dot so?" opening his dull, blue eyes in wondering surprise, "Und I haf peen makin' a shackass vooll uff myself? Vhell id vhas my dreat!"

He pushed his way toward the entrance, where Primrose was standing.

"You—olt vwhite sheep-he't und dhem odder vheellers vhat vhas vheelin' so foonny yooost a liddle vwhile ago—come alouk und haf something to dake de vhatteer vrom your eyes oudt!"

Never was an invitation to "take something" responded to with more alacrity.

The German threw down a five dollar gold-piece in payment.

"Dot is der last cend in mine bocket-book!" he said, ruefully, as it was swept into the till and a twenty-five 'cent piece returned in change.

"Struck rather hard lines, eh?" Primrose asked.

"Ain'd bat any vhook vor a mond'. See dhem shoont' holding up one ungainly foot. 'I vhalt more as dree hoonert mile dhem shoont in already.'"

"What can you do?" questioned Primrose, as the loafers dropped away one by one seeing that no more drinks were to be obtained.

"Anyt'ings dot vhas honest."

"And some things that are not honest, if you are well paid for it. I suppose?"

"Vhell, I mighd," naively.

"Do you understand the care of horses?"

"Dot vhas a lifery scaple where I my eyes vurst oben'd," the Dutchman declared, enthusiastically.

"Well, I will give you your board and ten dollars a month to attend to the horses in the stable back there," said Primrose, pointing through the rear window. "I discharged my last man a few days ago because he asked too many questions. You will sleep here in the bar-room. There is a folding lounge in the corner

yonder, and the racket won't disturb you when you get used to it.

"The stable is to be locked every evening, remember, and the key turned over to me. I have some valuable animals, and I have to be very careful, for the foot-hills are full of horse-thieves."

"You pet me dot vhas a shob I been dhis long vhill lookin' vor," said the Dutchman, with a broad grin. "Vhen I vork so sheap maype you vhill a glass of lager somedimes dhrow in."

Primrose shook his head.

"Nein?"

"I can't give any drinks away. However, if you wish, I will advance you a couple of dollars, and you can buy your beer out of that."

"Dot soods me shoost so vhell. Vhen vhill I dis pizness begin?"

"Right away, if you want to. Here's the key and here is a couple of dollars. Now, what's your name?"

"Gus Shroeder."

Primrose made a memorandum in his account-book, and then led the way to the stable, where he instructed the German as to his duties.

Shroeder was evidently a lover of horses, and he entered upon his work with a willingness and zeal that pleased Primrose greatly.

That night, however, he became to all appearances, gloriously and hilariously drunk. The two dollars passed back into his employer's till; and before ten o'clock the combination of drinks had so affected him that he could walk only with the greatest difficulty.

In this condition he reeled out into the street and disappeared.

"Where's that Dutchman?" Primrose asked, after a while, noticing that the bunk in the corner was empty.

No one could answer the question.

Then he remembered that Shroeder had failed to turn over the key to the stables. Somewhat alarmed he went out there; and sure enough found Dutch Gus snoring soundly on the hay.

"Get up here, you Dutch lout!" he cried, flashing a lantern in his face and at the same time giving him a sounding kick.

His heavy boot failed to make any impression on the thoroughly soaked German.

"Well, I guess he can't do any harm!" he muttered. "He'll not come out of that before morning."

He went to a blind panel at one side of the stable, gave it a shake, and then returned.

Could he have seen the expression on the face of the supposed Dutchman at that time he would not have felt quite so much at ease.

Finally he took up the lantern and departed, locking the stable from the outside.

"Well!" exclaimed the shadow, sitting up, "I've learned that much already; and I believe it's the key to the whole thing."

He crawled out of the hay and crept softly to the panel. It required sharp eyes to discover it. But the alleged Dutchman had eyes as sharp as those of a hawk, and he was not long in discovering the neatly-constructed joints.

He sought vainly for a lock, and finally began to thump the panel softly, hoping that he might touch a secret spring.

In this he was successful, but not until he had gone over the surface carefully, inch by inch.

Pressing upon this spring it yielded, and the panel flew backward, revealing a small opening leading downward into a tunnel. A shed-like projection concealed this opening or avenue from the gaze of the curious.

The panel swung to, of its own accord, and closed with a click; and he began to grope his way forward in the dungeon-like darkness.

CHAPTER X.

IN A TRAP.

AFTER traversing more than a hundred feet in this way, Shroeder came to a sharp angle. The tunnel extended only about ten feet further and then opened into the subterranean chamber, which was dimly lighted with coal-oil lamps.

The detective crouched in the shadow and peered in. There were a number of men in the apartment; and a little later Primrose joined them and rapped for order.

"As you well know, the road-agent business hasn't paid at all, lately," he began, as soon as he had secured order. "We must try something else."

"Now, I have received information which leads me to believe that Lucas Waldo is storing all the money that comes into his hands, together with the bullion from the Silver Lode, in the stone building which he uses as an office for the works."

"He has a big safe in there that can only be

forced open by gunpowder and the jimmy; and it is guarded night and day by armed men.

"That money and bullion he intends to send East, pretty soon, under a strong escort. If we can get hold of it, it will pay us for the time we have lost by enforced idleness."

"The hanging of Lengthy Jim places in our hands the key to this wealth."

"Hear! Hear!" shouted Silvertop, tossing his greasy hat into the air.

"You must industriously circulate the rumor that Lengthy was put out of the way by Waldo, the Silver Sport and the detective."

"Remember, that a lie well told and firmly stuck to will answer us as well as the truth."

"Then, when public sentiment has been worked up to a proper pitch, complaint can be made against these three fellows, and they can be landed in jail on a charge of murder."

"I will have something trumped up by which I can, at the same time, obtain control of the mine. Perhaps a deed of sale or a mortgage. Then we can go through that safe in great shape."

"If the thing pans out as I expect it to, we can retire and live for the rest of our days like princes—or, like our esteemed friend and fellow-worker, Silvertop, on the interest of our dents."

The "hear, hear," of the hoary-headed villain referred to, was this time drowned in a general burst of applause.

"What was that?" Primrose asked sharply, as the cheering ended.

The detective, in shifting his position, had displaced some earth from the walls.

Primrose drew a revolver and advanced toward the tunnel.

At this, the Dutchman fled, with cat-like steps, back through the pitchy darkness.

"I thought I heard something!" Primrose averred, peering into the tunnel. "It may have been only imagination, but we will see."

"Here, bring one of those lanterns!"

The lantern—a bull's-eye—was brought; and he proceeded to explore the passage cautiously.

All at once a volley of drunken curses, accompanied by sounds of kicking and thumping, reached their ears. The sounds seemed to come from the stable.

"It's that Dutchman!" cried Primrose, his eyes lighting with suspicion. "Can it be possible that he has been in the tunnel?"

The idea seemed too preposterous for belief; and another volley of blows and imprecations following immediately, he pushed forward to investigate the matter, followed by almost the entire membership of the Flower Brigade.

When the detective reached the secret door by which he had entered, he fumbled hastily about in a vain endeavor to open it. On the previous occasion he had only found the concealed spring by the most careful searching, and now he could not find it at all.

He cast his weight against the panel, but could not move it; then, knowing that Primrose was already in the tunnel, he gave it a tremendous kick. This also was barren of results.

"I'll have to face the music!" he exclaimed, turning about in his desperation and drawing a revolver.

Then an idea came into his head.

He turned again and began to kick and pound at the door, swearing vigorously at the same time in the vilest Dutch dialect.

He remembered that the door had closed of itself, propelled by secret springs; and that knowledge gave the cue to the part he intended to play.

When he had almost thumped the skin from his knuckles, he stopped. Then, a moment later struck his revolver with the blade of his knife, producing a clinking sound which was a fair imitation of that made by the lock when the door closed.

His intention was to make it appear that in thumping and kicking at the walls of the stable, on waking out of his drunken stupor, he had accidentally touched the secret spring and stumbled unawares into the tunnel.

"Och, mein Gott!" he cried, reeling forward, "what a dunderbet I vhas been to lock mineselluf ub der parn in like dot."

Then, as he seemed to realize for the first time that he was not in the open air:

"Gus Shroeder, you vhas a pigger vool as a zucker-vish! You gick der side uff dot parn oudt and valk into a zellar-vhull of plack puzzy-cats."

He stopped and stood cowering, with well-simulated, drunken gravity, as Primrose suddenly flashed the light of the bull's-eye lantern full in his face.

"Vhell, I dinks me maype you vill know dot vace vhen you habben do meed id again, eh? Id

makes me vightin' mat vhen a mans my eyes but oudt dot vay. You dinks me I vhas a roat-achent dot you go vlashin' my vace oafar like a bolicemans?"

"What are you doing in here?" Primrose questioned, sternly.

CHAPTER XI.

A TRYING ORDEAL.

SHROEDER shaded his eyes with one hand and endeavored to peer beyond the circle of glaring light.

"Oh, dot vhas you, Misder Brimroses!" he exclaimed. "Oxcoose me! I t'ought id vhas some grazy v heller dot vhas roovin' rount mit de he't-lightd uff a locomodeev, und I gits me my mat ub like a crizzly pear."

"Do you know where you are?" Primrose demanded, without heeding the apology.

"Vhell, vrom de loogs uff dings I mighd in a good many blaces pe, already. Bud I shudge—mint you, Misder Brimroses, I only zay I shudge—dot ve vhas in a zyglone zellar, mit a dail to id."

"How did you get in here?" in the same stern, even tones.

"Yes, that's the very identikal thing what we wants to know!" Silvertop howled, advancing to the front. "How'd ye git in byer?"

"Now, I gids me my vightin' mad ub vor zhure, vhen dot zucker-vish obens his moud."

"Answer the question!" commanded Primrose.

"You pet me I vhas all vide und a yart vool. I vhas a crizzly pear mit a class eye. Vhen I gids me my pack ub I vhas a vhirvind mit a vind-mill died to ids pehint barts!"

"Enough of that!" cried Primrose, as the Dutchman proceeded to place himself in a pugilistic attitude.

"Dot sheep-he't, dot vhiskey-chug mit a pull-tcg vace—dot—"

Shroeder choked with drunken rage and hesitated for words contemptuous enough.

"Dot bodato-nose! He insult me! I vos der gock-chicken dot gan whip him mit vun bant pehint me died."

He leaped into the air with a whoop and cracked his heels together viciously.

"Come! come!" protested Primrose, "enough of this horse-play. Go ahead into the room and if you don't answer straight, it will be the worse for you. Lead on, Silvertop, and see if you can keep your mouth shut for awhile."

He dropped in behind the staggering German, as he spoke, and followed him into the chamber, with a cocked revolver.

As they gained the room, Shroeder stared about him with drunken curiosity.

"Dis vhas a gave, eh?" he asked. "Vhell, I dinks me you vbellows shoose a foony blace vor a meedin'-haus."

Primrose had sent one of his men to examine the secret panel, and he now returned with the report that it was closed.

"Now, see here! I want straight talk and no foolishness. How did you get in here?"

Primrose placed the cocked revolver on the table, in front of him.

"How I gid in here? Py sheeniny, I ton'd know dot mineselluf, already. I vake me ub vrom a shleeb oudt und I vint me locked dot sthapple in. I vhas been as dhry as a zalt-parrel und as hoongry as a young eagle. Dot mate me gross like a pull-tog und I gick her zide vrom dot sthable oudt so guick like a gickin' machine. I vhas a sbatter-goon vor gickin' vhen I vheel gross like dot."

"I told you not to go into the stable after night."

"I know dot! Some mans must haf garriet me in dose sdaples vhen I vhas sleebn' as sount like an invant."

"You mean that you got drunk and disobeyed orders?" Primrose exclaimed, fiercely.

"So hellup me, cracious, no!" the Dutchman protested. "I vout nod pe so grazy like a vbool dot I lock mineselluf ub, if I do dot!"

Primrose looked at him keenly, and Shroeder returned the gaze with a stare of drunken stupidity.

"The fellow knows nothing!" thought the chief. "That noise was probably made by a rat."

Then to Shroeder:

"I believe you are an honest fellow, and I don't mind letting you into our secret. We're on a little jamboree to-night. It would hurt our business probably if the town knew that we were having a drinking bout, and so we came into the cellar. You like a drink yourself occasionally; and if you wish you can join us."

"Silvertop, set out that decanter!"

Silvertop complied, with alacrity, and Prim-

rose poured out a tumblerful of the fiery liquor and passed it over to Shroeder.

"Shentlemans, dot sdrikes me der righd shot in!" cried the German, lifting the glass, with unsteady hand. "Vhat shall I gall dis assembly dot I dhrinks uff ids heat?"

"Ther Flower Brigade!" roared an enthusiastic but incautious member.

Primrose's fist shot out, and the loose-tongued individual dropped to the floor like a log.

"Speak when you're spoken to, will you?" snarled the irate chief.

Shroeder stared stupidly at the fallen man; then lifted the glass to his lips.

"To der Vlower Prigade vhat vears putton-holes in ids roses?"

He tossed off the fiery liquor, or appeared to do so; although, in fact, the greater portion of it, by a lightning-like movement, was poured down the inside of his shirt.

"You are such a jolly fellow," said Primrose, with a forced smile, "that you must really become a member of our little social club. Take another drink and then we will swear you into our organization."

He filled and pushed forward another glass of liquor, which Shroeder deftly emptied down his shirt.

The fallen man had arisen to his feet and crept humbly to the rear.

"We meet here occasionally," Primrose continued, "for purposes of amusement; such as drinking and playing cards and having a good time generally."

"Every member 's, however, required to take an oath that he will not reveal the existence of this place or the fact that such a club has been organized."

"Dot zoots me, you pet!" cried the Dutchman, with owlish gravity. "I vhas villing to keeb my moud shud ub dighd like an oysder, uff I gids blendy uff peer und whiskey to vhill id vith."

Primrose then administered to him a modified form of the society oath.

"Remember, now," he said, sternly, "that if you say anything about what you have seen here, to a single person, I will shoot you down like I would a mad-dog."

Shroeder reiterated his protestations of absolute secrecy. Then a number of packs of cards were produced and the Flower Brigade fell to playing with the zest of old gamblers.

Primrose lost no opportunity of plying the German with the fiery liquor and in less than a half-hour's time he fell from his stool, helplessly and stupidly drunk.

The chief looked down on the prostrate man, with a smile of satisfaction.

"The fellow has a hard head, but no man could stand up against such a quantity of that stuff. I didn't want to kill the fool, for I fancy he may be of some service to me. Carry him back through the tunnel and place him upon the straw in the stable. Possibly when he wakes to-morrow this affair will seem altogether like a dream."

The command of the chief was complied with.

Not until noon of the next day did the supposed German awaken from his slumbers. Then he was heavy-eyed and apparently unsteady on his feet.

The door had been unlocked that morning by Primrose; and Shroeder stumbled out of the stable, yawning heavily and rubbing his eyes.

In passing from the stable he plucked a bunch of the blue bloom of alfalfa and pinned it to his coat.

The Primrose Palace was deserted by all except the proprietor, when Shroeder entered, with a trembling and halting gait.

Primrose frowned, as he noticed the blue blossoms.

"When vill dose Vlower Prigades meed again?" Shroeder questioned, as he advanced hesitatingly, toward the bar.

"What do you mean?" asked Primrose, with a terrible frown.

"Why, I vhas dhry as a zucker vish und I wand to again meed some uff dose vbellows."

"Shroeder, you're drunk!"

"Ach, mein Gott, no! I vhas so soper as a shudge uff bolicemans!"

"What are you doing with that alfalfa on your coat?"

"Dose vlowers? Dot shows I vhas a member peen uff dose Vlower Prigades."

"Well, if you remember that point so well, perhaps you will also remember that you took an oath to keep your mouth shut."

"Yaw! You pet me regolced dot, too!"

"You're not doing it by any means!"

"Nein?"

"Why, you're talking to me about it, now, ain't you?"

"Oh, zhure, dot vhas in der vambly!"

"Here's a drink. Swallow it; and let me impress upon your mind that you are to speak about that business to no one, not even to me. Now, throw those flowers away!"

Shroeder drank the liquor, and then tossed the blossoms into the street.

"I will not need you any longer as a hostler!" Primrose continued. "You disobeyed me last night by sleeping in the stable."

Shroeder seemed just now to remember that portion of the night's events.

"How vhas dot?" he said, scratching his head, reflectively. "I vhas lock dot sdaple in und I gick der hint-side vrom it oudt like a bile-drifer; und dhis morning id vhas vixd all righd und dot door vhas vide oben sbrawled. Gus Shroeder you vhas drunker as some loonadicks last night, pet me!"

"Not much wonder that matters seem a little mixed!" Primrose laughed. "You only drank something less than a barrel of whisky."

"So? I thought me I smell like a disdillery!"

"Have another drink!" urged Primrose. "It will take the kinks out of your head."

"As I said I won't need you any longer in the stable. But there is something else perhaps you can do, for which the pay will be better."

Shroeder looked dully at him, clearly not understanding his drift.

"You have seen this Josh Peppermint, I suppose? The fellow that rides the burro?"

"Yaw; I zeen dot shackass vheller!"

"I believe you claim to be a fighting man?"

"You pet! I vhas a vghitter vrom de old country. I vhas a Takoda plizzart mit an ice-perg in my moud, when I vonce gid me my grazy mat ub!"

Primrose laughed.

"I am in need of a fighting man just now; and, if you will put this Josh Peppermint safe under the ground, I will give you a hundred dollars, cash."

"A hoon'ert tollars! Sheminy cracious, dot vhas a bile uff money! Uff I ton'd lay dot Shosh Bebbermint oudt vor dot I vhas a loonadicks mit a din whistle died py my goad-dails!"

CHAPTER XII.

THE SILVER LODE.

Two days later, Sunny Selim became the manager of the Silver Lode.

Hot was the anger of Tobias Neeley, who had been discharged to make a place for the sport. And to his anger he added the fire of jealousy; for Neeley was, or at least imagined himself to be, desperately in love with Jennie Waldo.

The first care of the Silver Sport was to strengthen the fighting force. Several suspected employees were dismissed and their places filled by men known to be thoroughly reliable.

Of course these changes were not unknown to Caleb Primrose. Neeley, the discharged manager, was one of his paid spies; and two or three of the dismissed men were members of the Flower Brigade.

Primrose shrewdly guessed that Waldo had received warning of the proposed raid.

After thinking the matter over carefully, he sent for Neeley.

The latter was in a towering rage, as he proceeded to obey the summons.

Peppermint, since his enforced confinement, at the Waldo residence, had apparently become an admirer of Jennie's; and his advances seemed to be encouraged rather than repulsed.

The Yankee was now able to walk about; and on two occasions Neeley had seen them walking together in the adjacent grove, as the shadows of evening advanced.

With Jennie, heart free, Neeley had never considered his chances exceptionally good; and this later development seemed like closing against him forever the doors of hope.

"What's wanted?" he asked, as Primrose preceded him into a little room at one side of the gaming hall. The tones were as harsh as the growls of a bulldog.

"Not in a good humor, eh?" said Primrose, with a smile.

He did not wish to broach his scheme too suddenly, and so drifted into a preliminary conversation about Josh Peppermint in which he stated that he had made a bargain with Shroeder to lay the detective out.

This was news, and good news, to Neeley. He at once determined to speak to this reckless Dutchman and endeavor to make it worth the latter's while to hasten Peppermint's departure from this sublunary sphere.

"And now, to come to the subject that induced me to send for you!" said Primrose.

"You are aware of the movement contemplated against the treasure-house of the Silver Lode. I want to put in effect a little plan that may possibly save our necks should we fail and fall into the hands of our enemies."

"It is this: You will proceed at the earliest possible moment to abduct Waldo's daughter, and carry her off into the hills. You can take her to old man Simcoe's. I believe she can be kept there for months, if necessary, for there are very few people in the town who know anything about Simcoe, or where the old rascal lives. If Lengthy had remained there, as I instructed him to, instead of running off to that cave, the Silver Sport would never have found him."

Neeley could scarcely conceal his delight from the keen eyes of his employer. No plan of vengeance could have been suggested that would have pleased him better.

"With Jennie Waldo in our power we can dictate terms to that precious trio that will be apt to make them squirm. We can even hold her for ransom or for exchange should any of our friends fall into their hands."

"It'll work like a charm," Neeley exclaimed, delightedly.

"Yes; I feel satisfied the plan can be made to work. But you must remember one thing, and that is that the young lady must be well treated. It will make it easier for any of us who may chance to fall into their power."

Neeley promised to treasure up this caution, and, a little later, took his departure.

Beyond the outer door he encountered Shroeder, who had evidently just come up the street, and was on the point of entering the saloon.

"Why, hello! hello! Glad to see ye," said Neeley, grasping his hand and wringing it effusively.

The supposed Dutchman opened his blue eyes in evident surprise.

"Vhy, hello, yourselluf!" he exclaimed, pulling his pinched fingers slowly apart. "Py sheminy, I dinks me you must be vun uff dhem wringer-machines vhat dears a vellow's clodings indo more as zixdeen biees."

"Primrose was jest a-speakin' to me about you," cried Neeley, not heeding the complaint.

"So? Vhell, I hobe he vhas been zaying somedings sveet."

Neeley gave an impatient gesture, but continued, smilingly:

"Yes; he jest now told me as how you'd agreed to lay out this hyer Josh Peppermint handsome."

"You pet me I do dot!" exclaimed Shroeder. "When I meed me dot vbellow I vhill shumb mit bote feed ondo him like a afalanches."

"That's the kind o' talk! That's good! Now, I tell ye what I'll do!" hooking a finger confidentially into a button-hole of Shroeder's ancient coat. "The minnit you down this feller, you jest call on me an' I'll hand ye over fifty dollars as free as water."

CHAPTER XIII.

AN UNGRACIOUS SUITOR.

JUST before dark, Neeley placed two horses in waiting in a thicket of quaking aspens, only a few rods from the home of the Waldos. A convenient gorge, through which he ascended, enabled him to do this without much danger of discovery.

Then, as darkness came on, he advanced stealthily through the grove in the direction of the house.

He had proceeded in this way but a short distance when he caught the gleam of a white dress. He stopped and listened. Voices, in low conversation, reached his ears.

He drew a revolver, shifted his position, and again advanced. He was soon near enough to discover that one of the arbor seats was occupied by a young woman and young man; and his ears told him that they were Jennie Waldo and Josh Peppermint.

A smile of malignant pleasure came into his evil face. He reversed the ends of the revolver, that he might use it for a club, and crept slowly forward, with stealthy, cat-like tread.

When within a yard of the arbor seat, he drew himself erect, grasped the revolver more firmly and bounded forward. The blow was delivered with crushing force, and Peppermint slipped to the ground without a moan.

Jennie started to her feet, with a scream of terror. She turned to flee, but Neeley quickly tossed over her head a blanket, which he drew from beneath his coat.

The call had been heard in the house, as was evidenced by the moving of lights and the confused sounds of voices.

The Silver Sport was the first to hurry out in answer to that startling scream; and when he reached the apparently lifeless body of Pepper-mint he halted and stared about in a mystified and uncertain manner.

This gave Neeley time to reach the horses. Mounting one and leading the other, he drew the now wholly senseless girl up in front of him, dashed into a ravine and headed for the foot-hills.

He was a shrewd and wary scoundrel and purposely sought the most flinty paths, where the hoofs of the horses would leave no tell-tale signs.

When he had penetrated some distance into the foot-hills, he halted long enough to transfer himself and his fair captive, who had now revived, to the back of the led horse. Then he again pushed ahead.

The country grew rougher as they advanced; but Jennie's abductor rode right on, in grim silence, until long after midnight.

Then he halted; and, after listening intently, gave the plaintive and penetrating call of the cuckoo. This he repeated, three times.

A grumbling voice replied in indistinguishable words, a door seemed to open in the face of the mountain and the light of a sputtering lamp pierced the darkness.

An old man shambled out of the door and advanced, with unsteady steps.

"Who is it?" asked a shrill, cracked voice, and a withered crone appeared, shading her eyes with a claw-like hand, and endeavoring to penetrate the gloom.

"Dunno yit!" the old man grunted.

"Why, it's me, Simcoe!" answered Neely. "I've got a charge fer ye. The sweetest little piece o' female loveliness ya ever set eyes on, I reckon. I brought her up hyer under instructions from the boss. You're to treat her well—that is, as well's ye know how—and I'll lay around to see that nobody don't slip up onto us unbeknownst."

He slipped from the saddle as he spoke, and lifted Jennie gently to the ground. The long ride and the mental shock to which she had been subjected had rendered her so weak that she could scarcely stand.

"Whar's thet gal?" cried the old man, addressing the withered crone. "Hustle her out yer" to tend to these hosses."

The woman disappeared, and a moment later the sounds of cruel blows and the screams of a child came from the dug-out.

"Yes, granny! Yes! I'm a-goin'. Oh, don't whip me, granny!"

This was followed by another rain of blows, and a half-clad girl of twelve dashed through the doorway.

"Come an' tend to these hosses; don't ye hear me?" yelled the old man; and the girl advanced tremblingly to where he was standing.

"Yes, grandpa, I will. Where are they?"

"Cain't ye see?" he shouted. "Thar they be. Take the saddle off o' that 'un an' give 'em some hay, er I'll tan ye!"

She grasped the bridle-reins and hurried the horses away, as if she feared another beating.

Jennie was ushered into the dug-out, which was little more than a cave set in the mountain-side. Knowing that complaint and fault-finding would do no good and might possibly harden her lot, she quietly entered the one spare room pointed out to her.

It was a wing of the principal apartment, separated from it by a curtain of dirty calico, and seemed very much like a tunnel or mining-drift that had terminated abruptly.

Neeley went away in the morning, but this fact brought no relief to the prisoner. In truth, it seemed to increase the hardness of her captivity, for it left her to the tender mercies of Simcoe and his wife, and two more heartless and cruel wretches never lived.

The presence of Neeley was a perpetual annoyance, but he shielded Jennie from the causeless abuse that was poured alike on her head and the head of the unoffending Maria.

The next day Neeley returned, and in the afternoon he permitted Jennie to walk out along the hillside. He did not permit her, however, to pass beyond his range of vision.

As she turned a spur, in this solitary ramble, she came suddenly upon the child, Maria.

There was a mixture of fear and determination in the looks of the poor creature.

"Don't look torst me, miss!" she said, in a whisper. "They're a-watchin' of ye, and ef they know'd 'at I was hyer, they'd beat me fer it."

"I'm a-goin' to run away to-night. I can't stand it any longer to stay hyer an' be whipped for everything, like as if I war a nigger er a

mule. I know the trail to Bullion City, an' I'm a-goin' there. Ef ye want to send a letter by me to any o' yer friends, you kin place it under the aige o' this rock an' I'll kerry it."

Jennie was a young lady of keen perceptions and fertile expedients, and as soon as the girl commenced speaking to her, she began pulling at the leaves of a wild rosebush which grew near the trail. This gave an excuse for stopping, and also brought her face to face with the crouching girl.

"I hear everything you say," she answered, in a low voice, speaking apparently to the rosebush, "and will do just as you suggest. I will write a little note, as I go on around the trail. On my return I will leave it here where you can get it. Take it to Margaret Caxton, who lives in a little cottage just outside of the town. Any one can show you the place."

"She will not only send some one to my relief, but will also provide you with suitable clothing and a good home, where these people will not dare to come after you."

"I cannot express to you now how much I thank you for this noble and unselfish offer. Perhaps some day I can turn my thanks into deeds."

She threw the gathered leaves into the air as she concluded, and strolled on along the mountain-side.

On her return, a few moments later, she tossed a crumpled note to the hidden girl, who immediately drew back into the undergrowth and vanished.

CHAPTER XIV.

A PLAN THAT FAILED.

LATE the following day the girl Maria tapped timidly at the front door of the Caxton cottage. It was opened by Margaret.

Maria was pale and trembling, and so foot-sore, weary and faint she could hardly stand.

"Be you Miss Marg'r't Caxton?"

Receiving an affirmative answer, she delivered the note; then reeled and fell headlong in the doorway.

A moment later Maria revived and related her story, and the letter from Jennie was read.

Margaret was anxious to fly at once to her friends with the important information; but she could not forget the worn creature who had bravely pressed on, in spite of danger and exhaustion, until the message had been delivered.

Seeing that the girl was half-famished, she placed a bountiful repast before her. Maria ate ravenously, but nevertheless answered the questions which Margaret poured forth in a steady stream.

"Now, I will arrange a bed for you!" said Margaret, when the dishes had been cleared. "You are worn out, and must have sleep before thinking of anything else. I am going away for awhile, but will return before night. Then, I hope to find you feeling much better."

The girl was asleep almost as soon as her head touched the pillow.

Margaret did not waste much time on her toilet that afternoon; and ten minutes after Maria had fallen asleep, she locked the house securely, and hurried away toward the office and works of the Silver Lode.

An armed patrol was on duty at the gate, but she was well known, and found no trouble in gaining admittance.

To her dismay she learned that all of the men to whom she dared trust the secret were away with the searching-party, somewhere in the foot-hills or mountains. Even Josh Pepper-mint, who had scarcely recovered from the terrible blow given him by Neeley, was absent with the others.

The disappointment was bitter, and she could scarcely restrain her tears as she wended her way homeward.

Maria was still calmly sleeping; nor did she awaken until late at night. Then she was so greatly refreshed as to be almost herself again.

In the mean time, Margaret had paid two more visits to the Silver Lode, and had also called at the Waldo residence.

She could learn nothing definite at either place, and returned almost discouraged.

She was pacing the floor in a very frenzy of suspense when Maria awoke, and stared in a dazed way at her unfamiliar surroundings.

"Do you think you could find the way back to Simcoe's?" Margaret asked, as the girl blinked heavily at the light and rubbed her eyes.

"Yes'm, I think I cu'd. But I don't want to!"

"You would do it, though, if it was necessary to save the young lady who sent the note?"

Margaret looked at her appealingly.

"They'd beat me!" she cried, her eyes filling

with terror. "They'd kill me; I know they would; fer runnin' away! Don't make me go, missus! Please don't!"

"I'm not going to make you go!" said Margaret gently.

Then she related the result of the afternoon's search.

"Don't you think if you were provided with a good horse that you would be willing to show me the way to Simcoe's? No telling what may happen to Jennie, if she is not rescued soon."

The girl demurred, but by dint of much persuasion, Margaret finally wrung from her a reluctant consent.

"Now eat all you want!" counseled Margaret, heaping a bountiful repast upon the little table.

"I will get out the horses, and we will start as soon as possible."

Caxton had two horses, which he kept in a small stable not far from the cottage. These Margaret proceeded to saddle and bridle.

When they were in readiness, she hurried back to the house and filled a lunch basket with substantial eatables. She also slipped into a pocket of her dress a small, silver-mounted revolver—a present from the Silver Sport.

"Now, we must be going," she said. "I would like to reach the vicinity of Simcoe's dug-out before morning if possible. If not we shall have to hide in the hills until to-morrow night before we will dare to approach it. I have some hope that we may come upon the searching party; but if we do not, we will attempt Jennie's release by ourselves. If we fail, it is not likely that we shall be captured, if we keep close to our horses and remain concealed during the day. At any rate you will be safe; for, if you find that I am discovered, you can gallop away; I will overtake you if I am not captured."

Before she ceased speaking, they were at the stable. The horses were led out. Margaret assisted the girl to mount; then leaped lightly to the back of her own animal.

The moon arose shortly after, and its light aided them greatly when they reached the dangerous and uncertain trail through the foot-hills.

The horses, however, were mountain-bred and as sure-footed as goats, and they advanced at a rapid, swinging gait.

A short time before daybreak Maria laid her hand on Margaret's bridle-rein.

"We're almost there, now!" she explained, in subdued tones, through which thrilled an undercurrent of fear. "I 'low 'at we'd better hide the hosses some'eres nigh. Simcoe's got powerful sharp ears, ef he is old."

The advice was acted upon, and the horses were led into a deep ravine, filled with scrubby pines.

"Where is the dug-out, now?" Margaret questioned.

"Right in the side of yon hill!"

The girl pointed to a mountain, which loomed dark and grim, less than a half mile away.

"The door opens this-a-way, an' when any one comes out you kin a'most see inter the house frum yer. The young lady's 'most shore to walk along the trail over which we come jes' now."

Margaret felt a thrill of exultation.

"Does she ever come this far along the trail?" she questioned eagerly.

"No! But I kin show you a rock, when it gits light, which you kin hide behint an' talk to her jes' as I did t'other day. It's a big rock an' they can't see ye frum the house."

Margaret realized that if she expected to accomplish anything when an opportunity presented, she must have rest. So she watered the horses at the little branch that went brawling through the ravine. Then she hoppedled them carefully, turned them loose to graze and endeavored to obtain some sleep.

She would never have resigned herself thus to slumber, without a sentinel, if she had had greater experience; and her lack of this caution resulted most disastrously.

They were awakened by Neeley's harsh voice and the vixenish screams of Mrs. Simcoe.

"Run away ag'in, will ye!" cried the latter, pouncing upon the hapless Maria. "Ho, ho! I'll welt ye fer this! I'll larn ye to lead an inimy onto us!"

CHAPTER XV.

PRIMROSE SHOWS HIS HAND.

WHEN Sunny Selim halted by the side of his friend, Sydney Sheldon, who had been stricken down in so cowardly a manner by Neeley, he feared that he was dead. The scream which had come to his ears would not allow him to tarry, however, and he dashed on in pursuit of Jennie's abductor.

That pursuit, as the reader knows, was useless.

It was a sorrowful group that gathered in the Waldo residence a little later. Peppermint had been brought in, bleeding and senseless. Waldo made a hurried examination of his injuries and found him suffering from concussion of the brain.

Volunteer attendants were easily secured. Peppermint was confided to the care of these, and a searching party was immediately organized.

For two days and nights the search was kept up with unwavering courage and industry. Many times were they within a very few miles of that dug-out on the mountain-side.

On the second day they were joined by Peppermint. He was weak and giddy, still, but he sat his little burro with a firmness that concealed his lack of strength.

During the early hours of the second night—the night in which Margaret performed the journey that was to end so disastrously—word was brought them by one of their adherents in Bullion City that Primrose was preparing to move in force on the works of the Silver Lode.

The messenger stated that Primrose had gone before Silvertop—who, it will be remembered, claimed and exercised the functions of mayor—and had procured warrants for the arrest of Peppermint, Waldo and the Silver Sport for the alleged murder of the road-agent, Lengthy Jim.

He had also produced a bill of sale purporting to convey the Silver Lode from Waldo to himself, and had been granted some sort of an informal judgment of ouster against the present occupants.

This was certainly startling news. A council of war was immediately held and it was determined to return at once to Bullion City, inasmuch as they were making no perceptible progress at the work in hand.

Peppermint, however, announced his determination to remain in the hills until he found the trail they were looking for or became convinced that it was impossible to do so.

Sitting on his burro in the little gorge, he looked very sad and worn as they filed away, in the pale moonlight.

When they reached Bullion City, they found the statements of the messenger had not been colored. The most intense excitement prevailed. The town was rapidly dividing into two hostile camps. Pugilistic encounters were already becoming frequent, and a deadly and bloody collision seemed not far away.

Great was the surprise of honest Bill Caxton when he found his daughter missing, and the horses gone from the stable. It looked like another abduction; and he became almost frantic with grief.

While they were still startled and shocked by this new calamity, word was brought that Primrose's men had commenced their advance upon the Silver Lode.

Sunny Selim and Waldo, with their followers, had gone quietly to the works, in the darkness, and it was thought probable that Primrose was not aware of their return.

Primrose made his advance just before daylight, hoping to catch the sentinels napping. In this, however, he was mistaken. His progress was barred by leveled Winchesters, and the stern command to halt came from the closed gate.

At this Mickey McGee advanced and read the warrants, with a flourish and the rich brogue of old Ireland.

No response was given.

"Arrah, now!" he cried, hotly. "Do yees be listenin' in there? Oive another paper to read to yees that's as intherestin' as a timperance tract."

He unfolded the order of Silvertop commanding him, as marshal, to dispossess Waldo and turn the property over to Primrose.

"Phat d'ye say to that, now?" he cried, triumphantly, as he finished.

Waldo was just behind the gate and answered, with honest indignation:

"Why, only this! It's the most high-handed outrage that was ever attempted to be perpetrated!"

The words produced quite a commotion in the Primrose ranks, and it was evident that they had not counted on Waldo being behind the walls.

"Yees wor notified!" cried McGee, with great indignation. "I kem to the warruks to serve the papers an ye, and was tould that ye wor thrampin' through the hills. But I left a copy av thim wid the clerruk."

Waldo disdained to reply; and, after waiting a little while, Primrose called out:

"Well, what do you say, Mr. Waldo, to the charge of murder? We have warrants for your arrest. I suppose you will not resist their legal execution. No one will be more grateful than I will be, if you can prove yourself innocent of the charge."

"I say that it is a sneaking, cowardly, treacherous lie!" shouted Waldo. "And the man who attempts to arrest me on such a trumped-up charge had better say his prayers, now; for he will die with his boots on."

"Down wid thim!" shouted McGee, hopping about first on one foot and then on the other and flourishing a huge navy. "Down wid the dirty blagards!"

He started to advance.

At the same moment a rifle cracked within the inclosure. Mickey leaped into the air, dropped his revolver, then clapped a hand to his broken wrist and bobbed about like a beheaded chicken.

"Come on, if you want to take us!" shouted Waldo, derisively. "There are more cartridges in the same gun, and my men are anxious for a little target-practice."

Then, as Primrose's men halted and huddled together in a confused way:

"I assure you, gentlemen, that you are being deceived and led into danger by Primrose, who cares only for the gratification of his own desires. You know the man, or ought to know him by this time, and a greater scoundrel never went unhung."

A bullet from Primrose's revolver crashed into the gate.

"Shoot away, friend Caleb!" shouted the Silver Sport, mockingly. "The truth pinches, sometimes, eh?"

"So! My dear friend Selim is in there, too, is he?" sneered Primrose. "I suppose you are also enjoying the company of our original friend from New England, Mr. Peppermint. May peace be with your ashes; for we intend to cremate your entire company!"

This fiendish threat created quite a flutter of alarm among the defenders of the Silver Lode.

"He can't do it," Selim assured them.

Then, as casks and inflammable oil barrels began to appear in front of the gate, he posted his best marksmen at the hastily-made loopholes overlooking that point.

When these had assumed their positions, he called to Primrose, in a voice which had in it something of the roar of a caged lion:

"My men have orders to fire on the first man who rolls a barrel against the gate or attempts to set a match to one!"

This was answered by a howl of defiance, and a half-dozen tar-barrels were launched full at the walls.

CHAPTER XVI.

OFF FOR THE FOOT-HILLS.

A SHEET of flame spurted from the somber walls incircling the works of the Silver Lode, and the first glinting of the morning sunlight fell upon a number of men lying dead or wounded upon the ground, victims to their own rashness.

The sight had a cooling effect upon the ardor of Primrose's followers.

A consultation was held, and Primrose approached, waving a white handkerchief as a flag of truce.

"Well, what do you want?" demanded Selim, when Primrose was within easy speaking distance.

"A conference," replied Primrose. "You must see that you are completely surrounded. That the Silver Lode is, in fact, in a state of siege. You cannot possibly escape, and it is only a question of time when you will be starved out and forced to surrender."

"Knowing this and feeling certain that in the final outcome I shall win, I yet ask for a conference in the interest of peace and good order. The Silver Lode is legally my property, for I have Mr. Waldo's bill of sale, showing that fact."

"That's a falsehood!" shouted Waldo.

"I didn't come to bandy words!" Primrose continued, coldly. "I came in the hope of preventing further bloodshed. I claim and demand possession of the Silver Lode. You deny the claim and propose to keep me out by the bullets of Winchesters. Now, to show you how perfectly confident I am of the justness of my cause, I propose that the entire question be submitted to a board of arbitration!"

Waldo was thunderstruck.

"What can the fellow mean?" he asked turning to the Silver Sport.

"It's only a shrewd game of bluff, and is made wholly for the effect it will have on his

bearers. Primrose begins to see that he cannot dislodge us. If he could obtain possession of the Silver Lode for one hour it would be sufficient for his purposes. He sees that his game for the cash stored in the strong-box is likely to fail. Therefore, he has nothing to lose and all to gain by such a proposition."

"If you should accept he would move heaven and earth to purchase or influence the arbitrators. But he knows you will not accept and his words are buncombe intended for the public ear."

"No doubt he has a forged bill of sale, which you may be sure he has taken great pains to exhibit. If he can make the people of Bullion City believe that you are wrongfully withholding from him property for which you have received payment it will wonderfully increase his influence."

"The fact that the assertion is made so boldly and unhesitatingly will almost carry conviction to the minds of some men."

"What have you got to say?" Primrose shouted, becoming impatient. "I don't want to stand here all day!"

"Simply this!" replied Waldo. "That your game of bluff won't work. If you have such a paper as you speak of, it's a forgery."

"Then you refuse to arbitrate?"

"Yes! If you have any legal claim against me, submit it to the court of Sharon county, to which this mining district is judicially attached, although the fact has never been recognized by you and the alleged officers of this town."

"Bullion City can run its own affairs without any outside interference!" Primrose answered.

There was no reply.

Seeing that none was intended, he then begged the privilege of removing the dead and wounded, which was granted.

No further assault or advance was made during the day. The excitement did not abate, however. Armed men prowled constantly about the works and the streets of the town were filled with knots of eager disputants.

As night came on, Primrose's men again closed around the Silver Lode. But they contented themselves with firing their revolvers at the gate and tossing an occasional stone into the inclosure.

No notice was taken of these demonstrations, and toward morning the stone-throwing increased.

In the group thus annoying them, Selim finally noticed the stooping form and heavy face of Dutch Gus. He was making himself remarkably conspicuous as a stone-thrower, and was evidently endeavoring to attract attention.

"Hello! There's Peppermint!" Selim exclaimed, with a start. "What can he be after, I wonder?"

Waldo peered out at the Dutchman, with great interest.

"I don't know. But I believe he has discovered that we have noticed him. He's preparing to heave a stone over the fence. Lookout for it!"

"Py sheminy! I tinks me I vhill smash more as two hoon'ert uff dhem py dot!" he exclaimed, as he hurled the stone into the air.

"Give it to 'em, Dutchy!" Silvertop shouted.

"You pet me I do dot! I smash me dose vences indo vood kindlings poody soon!"

The stone had no sooner descended upon the inside of the inclosure than it was grasped by the Silver Sport, who hurried with it into the stamp-mill and then into the office, where a lamp was brightly burning.

Waldo followed, and together they bent over the bowlder.

As expected, a paper was attached to it. Selim cut the string, spread the paper out on the table, and read:

"I have discovered the place where Jennie Waldo now is. Margaret Caxton is with her, which is a matter of great surprise to me, as I did not know she left her home in Bullion City. Primrose sent a force to more securely guard his captives, and by following them I learned the location of the place. The accompanying map will enable you to find it. Come with about ten good men. It is my opinion that Primrose will not venture an assault until he can increase his forces. Be on your guard constantly against fire. Yours, PEPPERMINT."

A map of the hills, with the route to the dug-out traced in pencil, accompanied the letter.

The knowledge that Jennie was only twelve miles away brought a sense of unutterable relief to the readers. They at once jumped to the conclusion that Margaret had also been abducted. Caxton was called in and shown the letter.

"Can we do anything?" he asked, anxiously.

"We must!" was Selim's positive response.

"Yes, we must; but I hardly see how we are

going to!" said Waldo, with a perplexed air. "An assault may be made at any time."

He arose and paced the room, in his nervous anxiety.

"It must be done!" he declared, at last. "If the Silver Lode goes and with it every dollar I possess! Select your men, Selim, and fight your way through the ranks outside. I will stay here and try to beat the rest of them back, if they make a rush."

"There is no need of that, I think!" said Selim, smiling at his earnestness. "I believe we can accomplish it in a better way and without a very great amount of risk. I agree that we ought to go at once to the relief of the young ladies and I am ready to make the venture."

A vision of the fair face of Margaret Caxton arose before him as he spoke.

"Now, my idea is that I and the men I may select can steal out of here, one at a time, between this and morning, and Primrose be none the wiser."

"There are plenty of horses in my pasture just below!" said Waldo, grasping eagerly at the idea. "And you will find saddles and bridles at the stables, if these scoundrels haven't carried them away."

The Silver Sport called to a man who was standing near:

"Munson, bring eight of the best men into the office, will you?"

The man nodded, and disappeared; returning, in a few minutes, accompanied by eight stalwart young fellows, heavily armed.

Selim explained his object in calling them together, and asked if they were willing to undertake the rescue of the young ladies.

Munson looked along the line of faces inquiringly, and answered for them all:

"They ain't one of us but would die for them gals if it was a necessity."

He doffed his hat as he spoke; and a look of commingled pride and firmness came into the eyes of his companions.

"You are the very men I want!" Selim exclaimed, giving them each his hand in turn. "We will restore the young ladies in safety or we will lay our bones on the foot-hills."

"Ay, that we will!" cried Munson, and his men withheld a cheer only through fear of giving Primrose warning.

Ten minutes after, the first man crept stealthily from the rear gate; and an hour later Sunny Selim was in the ravine, with his band of picked men, mounted and ready to start for the foot-hills.

CHAPTER XVII.

"PIG OR PUP!"

As Peppermint sat on his little burro and watched the searching party disappear in the direction of Bullion City, he realized that he was thoroughly worn out and unfit for anything like satisfactory work. Only his intense anxiety had upheld him thus long. The pain of the unhealed wound caused his head to throb feverishly; and he fairly reeled as he swung out of the saddle.

He had no very definite idea of the course to be pursued in continuing the search, and decided to postpone thought upon the subject until morning.

The little burro was easily satisfied with any movement that gave it an abundance of time to eat. Peppermint hopped its front feet and turned it loose to crop the coarse herbage of the hillside, knowing it would not stray far. Then he threw himself upon the ground and sought rest in slumber.

The sun was more than an hour high before he awoke. The burro was not far away, and he speedily caught and saddled it. Then he made a hearty meal from the contents of the pack, which was borne behind the saddle, and washed down his breakfast with copious draughts from a snow-fed mountain torrent.

"Now, I feel able for duty!" he exclaimed, with satisfaction. "My headache is gone, and I am almost as strong as ever."

The burro raised its ugly head and turned its expansive ears forward. It was on the point of breaking into a deafening bray, when a word from Peppermint brought it to its senses.

"None of that, now, Jake, if you love me! See or hear something down the trail, eh? Well, we'll get back into the scrub where we can see and not be seen. Possibly we may discover something of importance."

He led the burro around the hillside and tied him in a thicket; then crawled along until the trail to Bullion City lay plainly below him.

What he saw was a troop of eight horsemen riding rapidly along. Before they came opposite his place of concealment, however, they

turned into an almost indefinable path leading nearly at right angles from the main trail.

"Aha! I must follow those fellows. There is no town or village in that direction, and if there's been any new mining-camps opened, it's since I left Bullion City."

He hastened down, sprung upon the back of the burro, and was soon speeding along after the horsemen at the best gait of his diminutive steed.

After a ride of two hours the burro again threw its ears forward. This time it showed an eagerness to advance, and Peppermint judged that the horses were in the vicinity.

He halted and tied the burro in a place of concealment near the trail, and advanced on foot.

By ascending an elevation he was able to look into a small valley just beyond the turn of the trail. In this valley were the horses, but their riders were nowhere to be seen.

In the course of a half-hour, he saw them moving, in single file up the slope of the opposite mountain, evidently having just come from some point in the valley below.

Great was his surprise to see a door open in the face of this mountain, into which the men vanished. It was the door to the Simcoe dug-out and was so close an imitation of the surrounding rocks that he might have ridden within twenty feet of it without discovering it.

Another half-hour passed and two women came out of the dug-out, followed by a man. The distance was too great to determine their identity. From their erect appearance and their walk, however, he judged that they were young women.

He determined to get nearer if possible and obtain a view of their faces.

He believed that it would be possible to make a closer approach by going around the opposite side of the hill.

He ran back, remounted the burro and prepared to make the attempt. It required a circle of nearly a mile to bring him to a point opposite the one he had just vacated, but he put the spurs to the little brute and accomplished it in a remarkably short space of time.

He now saw only the two women. Thinking that the man had probably gone back into the dug-out, he descended into a ravine to hide his movements and began picking his way slowly toward the mountain-side.

He had not advanced far in this way before he became aware that he had been discovered. The man whom he had supposed in the dug-out had caught sight of him and was now dogging him. The one glance which he caught of the heavy, evil face told him that the man was Neeley.

As soon as he made the discovery he turned into a gorge leading to an adjoining valley, with the intention of waylaying his pursuer. As he did so, an idea came into his head which caused him to laugh aloud.

He spurred the burro rapidly forward, and, when he had covered what he considered a safe distance, halted. Leaping down, he drew the burro into the sheltering bushes, took some articles of clothing from the pack, and by a few deft changes, transformed himself into Gus Shroeder, the howling Dutchman fresh from Vaterland.

Then he gave the burro a cut with a switch that sent it clattering off out of sight.

It was not many minutes until Neeley appeared, creeping and prying through the dark gorge, where the shadows lay in patches almost as black as midnight.

When he arrived opposite Shroeder's place of concealment, that individual leaped out upon him.

"Ah, you Shosh Bebbermint!" he cried, as he dealt Neeley a stinging blow. "Uff I ton'd make you tink I vhas a vbying-machines mit vorty t'ousant vings, dhen I vhas no more as a Gansas hobbergrass. Vor dwo tay I haf vhol-lering you peen, und now dot I vhint you, I vhill smash you indo minze-meed shoost like a sausage-grinter!"

Neeley was taken wholly unawares, but he rallied quickly and endeavored to close in with Shroeder.

As he did so the latter dealt him a blow that almost knocked him senseless.

"I cave!" he said, as he opened his eyes and stared hard at the towering form above him.

"You gave, eh?" shouted Shroeder, whipping out a big knife. "Vhell, ve see somet'ings apout dot already. I vhas nod in der gafing pizness mineselluf."

He flourished the knife wickedly, and advanced a step.

"When you vhas peen blanted dose taisles

peneat', dot vhos a hoon'ert und vhlfty tollar in dese bants-bockets. You see sometings like dot, eh? A hoon'ert und vhlfty tollar ton'd grow on efery pushperry gooses!"

Neeley rubbed his bruised optics and stared at Shroeder as if he could not credit the evidence of his senses.

"Well, may I be durn'd!" was all he could manage to articulate.

Then, as Shroeder gave the knife another wicked flourish:

"Say, Dutchy, who do you take me fer, any-way?"

The question and the tone of voice brought Shroeder up with a jerk. He peered down into the face of the prostrate man with a startled look.

"So!"

There was a world of surprise and wonder compressed into that single word.

Then he tumbled backward upon the flinty earth and rolled over and over in a very excess of explosive mirth.

"Can't say 'at I kin see anything so pesky funny about this hyer bizness," Neeley exclaimed, with supreme disgust, as he felt over the bumps that were growing on his cranium. "Mebbe it's a picnic for you, Dutchy, but it's more like a funeral for the undersigned."

"Holt me, somepoty!" cried Shroeder, clasping his aching sides. "Dot vhas yooost doo foony vbor noddings. I haf me nod sooch biccies since I come dhis gountry ofer."

"I thought you was Peppermint when you jumped out at me," Neeley explained.

"Yaw, me doo! You tolt me dot I shoul't der hite vhip off uff dhem vbellers, und vhen I see you coming alonk so kviedly-I dells mineselluf, 'so hellup me cracious, I vhill gif him a goot vuns.' I dinks me dose is dhem Shosh Bebberminds, und you dinks you I vhas dhem Shosh Bebberminds, und id vhasn't neider uff us. Dot vhas a goot shoke."

"Well, but how's this?" questioned Neeley. "Peppermint went through hyer a little while ago. I saw him."

"Dot is vbat I dinks mineselluf. I vhol-ler dhem vbellers vhor more as dwo tays yet. I bite me avhile ago dot hillsite pehint und I see dose Shosh Bebberminds come alonk here. I creeb town und shumb oudt at dot vbellers, und it vhas you. How you oxblain dot, eh?"

"He must have gone by before you got down hyer," said Neeley, rubbing his bruised head reflectively. "By this time I reckon he's on t'other side the mountain."

Shroeder sprang to his feet in evident alarm. "If he gits furdher as dot I musd vhlly like dwo picycles uff he ton'd gid gleam avhay vhor me."

"You can't ketch him now," said Neeley. "Might's well come over to the shanty and rest up awhile."

"You got some vhomans over dhere, eh?" questioned Shroeder, chucking Neeley lightly under the chin.

"What do you know about them?" Neeley questioned, in great surprise.

"Oh, I see dthose vhomans, you pet me. Dwo younk gyurls vbalk dot moundain-site py. You vhas a olt Plue Peart, eh? Oh, you vhas a shly weasels dhis dime, already!"

Neeley reddened and would have blushed had such a thing been possible. It greatly tickled his vanity to be thought a ladies' man.

"No, I ain't a masher!" he protested, feebly, as if he really wished that he was. "Them's a couple of girls frum Bullion, up hyer fer their health."

"Dthose Valto gyurl, eh? I heert somet'ing apout dot vhemales rooning avhay py a mans!"

"Yes; and t'other is Caxton's darter."

"Sol! A habby vamily you musd pe ub dhere."

"Well, we git along something like cats and dogs! Come up an' see fer yourself!"

"Nodding vould petter sood me uff I vhint dime, bud yooost now I musd dot Shosh Bebbermint pe looking afder. Id vhas a hoon'ert und vhlfty tollar in mine pook-bocket, you know, uff I vhint dot vbellers."

"And lay him out!" Neeley corrected, with a laugh.

"Und lay him oudt! Yaw; I vhill lay him oudt like a dree a-valling."

"Well, all I kin say is. I hope you'll ketch him. He's a-sneakin' around here tryin' to spy out something. I'd go with you ef you hadn't shuck me up so bad awhile ago."

Shroeder laughed lightly and set off down the gorge in the direction taken by the burro, and Neeley climbed painfully back over the route he had come.

As soon as the supposed Dutchman was out of

Neeley's sight a smile broke through the look of German simplicity.

"For downright fun that was equal to a circus!"

The form and face were Schroeder's, but the voice was the voice of Sydney Sheldon.

The burro was cropping the sage-brush in the valley below.

A few quick changes brought Peppermint once more upon the scene.

He laughed again.

"That little adventure reminds me of the famous story of the darky, who was ordered by his master to convey a pig to a neighbor's. On the way he stopped at a saloon for a drink, leaving the sack with the pig in it outside. A wag removed the pig and replaced it with a pup, and the darky could never understand how the transformation was effected. Neeley will begin to think pretty soon that I can be pig or pup, at pleasure."

The burro's head was turned toward Bullion City, and the journey commenced, which was to summon Sunny Selim and his picked company to the rescue of the young women.

CHAPTER XVIII.

LOVERS ALL.

WHEN Peppermint tossed the boulder, with the letter attached to it, over the wall, he only waited long enough to satisfy himself that Selim had secured it.

Then he began a series of retrogressions, which carried him slowly to the rear without attracting suspicion as to the cause of his retreat.

When he had freed himself from the throng, he hurried at his best gait to the place where he had left the burro.

Morning dawned before he reached the vicinity of Simcoe's dug-out. A thin, blue smoke ascended from some invisible chimney, showing that the occupants were astir. It was a pleasant sight, for he had feared they would depart during the night.

He soon became aware, however, that something unusual was contemplated. Neeley came out and looked long and earnestly down the trail toward Bullion City.

A little later the eight horsemen, who had passed the night in an adjoining grove, rode up to the door.

"They're going to hunt another hole," mused Peppermint. "Neeley has evidently become alarmed because J. Peppermint, Esquire, was in the vicinity yesterday."

The events of a few minutes showed that he was correct.

Two of the horsemen dismounted, and their horses were given to Jennie Waldo and Margaret Caxton. Neeley's horses were placed at the disposal of Simcoe and wife.

When the forward movement began, Neeley and Maria led the advance on foot, Jennie and Margaret followed, and the rear was brought up by the mounted and dismounted horsemen.

When they had passed out of sight, Peppermint carefully noted the direction they were taking. Then he mounted the burro and hurried to the place appointed for the meeting with the Silver Sport. Here he pinned a note to a tree, in a conspicuous place, and hastened back to watch and follow the retreating party.

Luckily they were compelled to move slowly, and he was not long in catching sight of them again.

For more than an hour he hung upon their trail. During this time he cast many a backward glance. Finally he heard the distant trampling of hoofs, and fearing the sounds might reach the retreating party, he rode back.

It was the Silver Sport and his men. He had found the note, and was hurrying at the top of his speed, trusting to Peppermint for warning when he began to press Neeley closely.

"They are making for a trail that runs through a narrow valley, or rather gorge, two or three miles beyond," Peppermint explained.

"Its opposite end can be reached, I am sure, by riding round the base of the hill you see ahead of us and to the right. It is a long way round, but it can be accomplished in time by rapid riding."

"My idea is for you to separate your force and send half the men round the hill, and follow the direct trail with the other half, keeping carefully out of sight until the time comes to strike. Then, when Neeley's party is well within the gorge, close in on them from both sides."

"When the party that circles the hill is in position, let them fire a gun as a signal."

The advice was so good that it was at once adopted and acted upon.

As Peppermint's burro was jaded and not very speedy at its best, Selim led the flanking party himself, to see that no slip occurred in that part of the programme.

Peppermint assumed command of the remainder, and led them carefully but rapidly over the direct route.

They could not approach very near without revealing themselves until after Neeley's party had entered the gorge. Then they closed up as quickly as possible, with a due regard for secrecy.

When the whip-like crack of the rifle came from the distance, echoing and reverberating with startling distinctness among the rocky crags, Peppermint's men bounded eagerly forward, and the yell which went up from their leathern throats was answered by a ringing cheer from the flanking party.

Neeley's men were fear-stricken and paralyzed when those charging parties swept toward them. They could not tell the number of the foe, for each man was doing enough yelling for fifty.

A short time they buddled together irresolutely; then, as a volley of balls, purposely fired high, whistled and screamed above their heads, they dashed their horses at a rocky opening, which seemed to offer a means of escape, and fled wildly.

Neeley, seeing that resistance was useless, attempted to follow them. Then recognizing the need of a swifter means of locomotion than his feet could give, he attempted to pull Simcoe from his horse as the old man darted by. Simcoe struck him to the ground with a howl of rage, and dashed after the fleeing horsemen, followed immediately by his shrieking wife.

Before Neeley could rise, Peppermint was upon him. Munson came to Peppermint's assistance, and the struggling scoundrel was soon lashed so tightly, he could scarcely move.

"I allow you might's well keep cool!" said Peppermint, with his old-time drawl. "Folks similarly sarcumstanced hev been knowed to bust a vein by tew much wrigglin'!"

"Curse you!" Neeley snarled. "I ought to 'a' laid you out fer good, when I had a chance."

"That little love-tap is abaout well, thank 'ee!" said Peppermint, with mock politeness. "And raaly, naow, friend Neeley, you ort tew 'a' laid me aout yistiday when you had sech a all-fired purty show fer it."

"Dhen I dinks me, py sheminy, dot I vout neffer dot hoon'ert und vhfity tollar gid vhor layin' dhose Shosh Bebberrinds out!"

There was a marvelous facial change, a change as great as that which the voice had undergone.

Neeley's jaw dropped, as the truth flashed upon him, and he stared at the man before him in stupid and speechless amazement.

"Fie! Fie, Mr. Peppermint! Don't badger a man when he is down!"

It was the laughing voice of Margaret Caxton. She rode up, at that moment, accompanied by Jennie Waldo. The girl, Maria, bounded along at her side, jubilant and thrilled with an unutterable sense of freedom.

"Quite a surprise-party you and our friend Selim have given us!" said Jennie. "A little startling, but preferable, I am sure, to the excursion we were taking."

Her words were jocular, but the tears glistened in her eyes even as she spoke.

Selim and his men had arrived by this time; and, if there was no expression of sentiment in the presence of the encircling horsemen, you may be sure that

"Soft eyes looked love to eyes that spake again!"

"Gentlemen, allow me to present my ward and protegee, Maria Holton!" Margaret exclaimed, merrily. "Although in no wise related to the Simcoes, as she informs me, she has lived with them almost from infancy and suffered much at their hands. I expect to give her a home with me, and shall call her Maria Caxton!"

"Unless you should conclude to change your own name!" whispered Selim, who sat at her side.

Margaret colored and bit her lip; but kept her eyes fastened upon the girl, who was acknowledging the introduction with her best courtsey.

Neeley was lifted to the back of a horse, to which he was firmly bound.

Then the homeward journey was commenced. The necessity for rapid traveling impressed every mind, and no grass was allowed to grow beneath their horses' feet. The fear that they might find Primrose triumphant, or Waldo at least sorely pressed, acted as a spur to urge them on.

CHAPTER XIX.

A LIVELY TIME.

SHORTLY after Selim and his men left the Silver Lode, Primrose drew off his forces.

When the sun came up it revealed the streets and alleys in the vicinity deserted. But large crowds of men could be seen upon the main streets and about the center of the town.

As the hours advanced, the sounds of saws and hammers came distinctly to their ears. Occasionally a drunken yell arose.

"There is danger brooding in the air!" Waldo asserted. "I would give much to know what is going on out yonder."

"I think I might obtain the information for you!" said a keen-eyed young man, who had overheard the remark.

Waldo looked sharply at the speaker.

"You can trust the boy!" said Caxton, interpreting the look. "I am well acquainted with him. He has been working in another camp, and is not generally known here."

"Do you think you could go into the town and walk boldly about among that crowd without being detected?"

"I think I could!" the young man replied, modestly. "Have you no friends there to whom you would wish to send a word?"

"I have friends there, but they seem afraid to do anything!" Waldo answered, with a frown.

"That was what I was thinking of when I asked the question. They fear Primrose because his men are organized and they are not, and so they remain quiet and do nothing. If there is any one among them who could be trusted to organize and lead them it occurs to me that you might receive substantial aid from the outside."

"The boy has a head on his shoulders!" said Caxton, with a nod of approval.

"There is such a man!" Waldo replied, thoughtfully. "Solon Brown, the principal storekeeper."

"Then my idea would be," replied the youth, "to have this Mr. Brown proceed quietly to organize and arm your friends and such men as he can rely on and hold them in readiness for the return of the Silver Sport. Then let him place himself and his men under Selim's command to be used as the latter's judgment may dictate."

The suggestions seemed so good that Waldo requested they might be at once carried out.

Before this could be done, however, a number of Primrose's men stationed themselves in a building opposite and the youth's departure was necessarily postponed.

It was not until the middle of the afternoon that he was able to steal away unobserved and join the noisy throng in the streets.

He had scarcely departed when it became evident to the watchers in the office of the Silver Lode that Primrose contemplated a movement of some importance.

"He hasn't abandoned the effort to take this place yet, you can see!" Caxton observed. "I knew he wouldn't. What he is up to now, though, is more than I can guess."

They were not kept long in the dark as to Primrose's object. A number of low trucks, on which were mounted heavy, bullet-proof walls, were rolled slowly into view. Behind them Primrose's men leaped and danced in a very delirium of exultation.

Primrose, on that day at least, had not spared his villainous whisky. This was evidenced by the number of drunken men in the oncoming rabble. Baffled once, the proprietor of the Primrose Palace had loosed the hell-hounds of drunken insanity and malignant hate. Liquor had been poured out like water, and his men hurried to the assault like furious and reckless demons.

"Here they come!" Waldo announced anxiously. "Our young friend has hardly had time to accomplish anything and we are, I fear, going to have a hard time of it. Those walls are the explanation of the mysterious sounds we have been hearing."

His words were almost drowned by the yells and hootings of the oncoming mob.

"They are rolling empty oil barrels behind those mounted walls!" said Caxton, peering through a loop-hole. "They evidently intend to burn us out."

"And I fear they will be able to accomplish their purpose!" exclaimed Waldo, anxiously. "Our Winchesters will be worth very little against those heavy timbers. Oh, that Selim and Peppermint were here now!"

The spang of a rifle cut the air and a ball from the Winchester of one of their men hurtled into the crowd beyond the line of advancing

walls, and the crowd melted away like a snow-bank blown on by a hot wind.

"Burn them out, my men!" yelled Primrose, encouragingly, from behind the foremost wall.

The command was answered by a pandemonium of drunken yells, and the oil-barrels were quickly rolled against the gate of the Silver Lode.

Primrose ignited a mass of kerosene-saturated cotton and hurled it, with his hand, among the oil-barrels.

The rapid fire of the defenders was answered by opposing volleys and a series of derisive yells.

The flames leaped up with an angry hiss and entwined themselves like serpents around the wood-work of the gate.

Seeing that the gate must go, Waldo drew his little force into the office, and there prepared to defend the coveted treasure to the last.

In less than a half-hour the gate was a mass of warped iron and glowing embers.

"At them, my men!" yelled Primrose, with demoniacal glee, and with horrible cries the assailants propelled the trucks against and over the dying fire.

Then, high above the howlings of the frenzied mob, arose the ringing cheer of Josh Peppermint as he led his men to the rescue.

The force marshaled by Solon Brown, in obedience to Waldo's instructions, placed themselves in the rear of the gallant little band and threw themselves upon Primrose's drunken rabble, with a fury that was resistless.

As Waldo saw Peppermint charging madly up the street, mounted on his plucky little burro, he threw open the office door and led his own force to the assault.

Hemmed in upon two sides, cut down by volleys from the rear and maddened by the flames that had now communicated to the mounted wall on which they had much relied for protection, Primrose's men threw down their arms and fled in wild disorder.

As for Primrose himself he fought like a caged tiger and was only taken after he had been stricken senseless to the ground by a clubbed rifle. With him was captured Silvertop and Mickey McGee.

When the smoke of battle had drifted away and quiet was again in a measure restored, the young man who had carried the message to Solon Brown put in an appearance.

He had done yeoman service with Brown's men, having been prevented from returning to the Silver Lode by the unexpected suddenness of Primrose's final assault.

From him the cause of the hurried advance of Primrose's men was learned.

He had scarcely had time to communicate Waldo's request to Brown when a horseman dashed up to Primrose, who was superintending the construction of the mounted walls. That horseman was one of the number defeated by Peppermint and Selim that day in the foot-hills, and he bore to his chief the information of Peppermint's advance.

This it was that determined Primrose to make the assault that had just ended in his total defeat and capture.

CHAPTER XX.

JOSH PEPPERMINT'S JUBILEE.

Now that the tide had changed in Waldo's favor, many men who had held aloof or been passively hostile came to his assistance, and the flames were quickly stayed.

Peppermint smiled audibly, as he noticed this, and remarked, in an aside, to Selim:

"Reminds me of an old lady I once knew, whose philosophy of life was always embodied in the expression: 'This human race is a queer race of people!'"

Now that the lawless element of Bullion City was effectually cowed and their spirits broken, the timid officials of Sharon county, who had feared to make a move before that time, reached forth the mailed hand of the law and laid it heavily upon the offenders.

The Flower Brigade was effectually broken up. Its members, fleeing for their lives, sought refuge in distant mining-camps. Some even penetrated to the British Dominions or crossed the seas to escape the vengeance of a long-out-raged justice.

Bullion City took on a new lease of life and vigor. The mining interests, that had languished because of the piratical exactions of the road-agents, became prosperous and flourishing. An excellent class of men replaced the villainous crowd that had followed the lead of Primrose.

As for Primrose and his associates in prison—Silvertop Neeley and McGee—they were taken to the county seat of Sharon county and given a fair and impartial trial.

In this trial it was developed that Primrose's affairs were tottering to their fall when he planned that daring raid upon the treasure-safe of the Silver Lode. In fact, he was a financial, as well as a moral, bankrupt. The gorgeous saloon and gambling-hell, known as Primrose Palace, was mortgaged for more than its value and ruin stared the villain in the face.

He had organized the Flower Brigade more than a year before, that he might have assistants in carrying out his nefarious schemes. But it required a mint of money to hold those lawless men in subjection to his will, and the venture had been a losing one from the start.

Realizing he could not tide over the disastrous period that was approaching, he had conceived the plan of capturing the Silver Lode and rifling it of the money it contained, of which there was nearly fifty thousand dollars in bank notes alone.

If successful he intended to allow his followers to take the bulky and cumbersome bullion. The bank notes he proposed to secrete on his own person and, under the shadows of night, vanish forever from Bullion City, leaving his followers to shift for themselves.

It was impossible to fasten the crime of murder upon him and his confederates. Court and jury were alike convinced that they were guilty of taking the life of Lengthy Jim. But it was not squarely proven. None of the witnesses had actually seen the crime committed; and, although the circumstantial evidence was quite strong, the "legal doubt" to the benefit of which even the most desperate criminals are entitled, saved their worthless necks from the gallows.

One point of interest was developed, however, in this effort to fasten upon them the charge of murder.

That was that Sunny Selim had received from William Caxton the information which led to the discovery of Lengthy Jim's hiding-place.

Caxton, by chance, overheard Primrose speaking to Mickey McGee about the attempted stage robbery. In the conversation Primrose said that Lengthy Jim had left Simcoe's dug-out and taken refuge in a certain cave. The location of the dug-out was not mentioned, but that of the cave was; and Primrose had said that if Lengthy could be kept out of the way for forty-eight hours longer they would be able to hang Peppermint on the charge of being the road-agent leader.

Caxton lost no time in communicating this important information to Sunny Selim, with the result already known to the reader.

At the conclusion of the trial, which was long drawn out and tedious, the jury returned verdicts of guilty upon the other counts, without leaving their seats.

Primrose was sentenced to hard labor for life; and his confederates were each given ten years' imprisonment in the Territorial Penitentiary. Silvertop died two years afterward. The others, worn and broken men, are still delving in the prison mines.

Before the conclusion of that famous trial Bullion City arrayed itself in holiday attire in honor of a double wedding, which was celebrated in a manner long-remembered.

The happy couples whose lives were thus linked together were Sunny Selim and Margaret Caxton; Sydney Sheldon, better known as Josh Peppermint, and Jennie Waldo, the beautiful daughter of the proprietor of the Silver Lode.

When the guests were duly assembled in the drawing-room of the Waldo mansion, and while the white-haired minister was yet fumbling for his glasses, honest Bill Caxton raised his hand for silence.

"I have been delegated, friends, to make an announcement and offer a few words of explanation!" he said, in a voice husky with emotion. "The secret I am about to reveal is a secret no longer to the parties most interested. The young man known as Sunny Selim, who is, today, to wed my daughter, is the son of our good host, Lucas Waldo!"

The announcement created a sensation, and the buzz of voices was so great that he could scarcely proceed.

"I am proud of him and of the record he has made recently; but, friends, I am more proud of the fact, that my daughter became his affianced wife long before she knew that he was a legal heir to the Waldo fortune. Bill Caxton is penniless, but I feel sure Margaret values more

than money the wedding portion her father this day bestows upon her—the only one he can bestow—the heritage of a good name."

His voice failed him; and there was not a dry eye in the room as he sunk, trembling, into a chair.

After the ceremony, the benediction and the congratulations, the following facts were made known by Waldo.

His son, whose name was Ernest, had been rather intractable and wayward in his early youth. Waldo had married a second wife—now dead—and with her Ernest could never agree. Waldo loved dearly the wife of his second marriage, and his son's evident antipathy for her angered him.

Finally an explosion came, and in a fit of passion Waldo had ordered Ernest to leave his house and never return. The impetuous and hot-headed boy took him at his word, and the next day disappeared.

When reason regained its sway Waldo was almost heart-broken; and searched persistently for his son. All his efforts were fruitless. Years rolled away, his wife died, and but for his beloved daughter, Jennie, a settled sadness must inevitably have taken possession of his heart.

Finally Ernest returned, changed by years, and with a heart as changed as his appearance.

He had intended to at once disclose his identity and beg his father's forgiveness.

But on reaching Bullion City, he became aware that Primrose was organizing his followers for the purpose of crushing Mr. Waldo.

Affecting the exaggerated dress and air of a full-grown Western sport, he began to haunt the Primrose Palace, for the purpose of discovering means and measures by which Primrose and his gang of road-agents and cut-throats might be overthrown.

He gained Caxton's confidence speedily—without revealing his identity, however—and thus began his acquaintance with and courtship of Margaret.

It was his appeal, also, that brought Sydney Sheldon, the detective, upon the scene.

The festivities, the feasting, the merriment, and the spontaneous overflowings of wit and good-cheer were such as no pen could faithfully and accurately portray.

The mansion was brilliantly illuminated that night, and the town was a sea of twinkling and blazing lights. There was music, mirth and dancing, and the event was long remembered as *Josh Peppermint's Jubilee*.

THE END.

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